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A YANKEE COSSACK: or, The Queen of the Nihilists.

A STORY OF THE GREAT CORONATION AT MOSCOW.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER,

AUTHOR OF "NEMO, KING OF THE TRAMPS," "RED RUDIGER," "THE RUSSIAN SPY," "THE RED RAJAH," "THE IRISH CAPTAIN," "THE MAN IN
RED," "DEATH'S HEAD CUIRASSIERS," "PHANTOM KNIGHTS," ETC., ETC.



"SURRENDER OR I'LL RUN YOU THROUGH!" THE MAN FOLDED HIS ARMS AND ANSWERED: "KILL, IF YOU PLEASE. I'VE DONE
WHAT I CAME TO DO."

A Yankee Cossack; OR, The Queen of the Nihilists.

A Story of the Great Coronation at Moscow.

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CHAPTER I.

A BALKAN BIVOUCAC.

It was cold enough to make one wish heartily for a house and a fire, but no house was in sight on the mountain side. The night was coming on and the wind was howling dismally through the bare branches of the oak trees overhead.

Under the oaks lay a covering of snow about four inches deep, and under the snow were rocks of all varieties, up and down the sides of the declivities.

Nothing could be seen but the bare gray trunks of the trees and the white mountains, for they rose on all sides and shut in the view.

In the midst of this desolate scene, a young man on foot went struggling along over the rocks, slipping and sliding, leading a thin ragged-looking horse behind him, and followed by two men, whose tall fur caps and long coats showed that they were Cossacks of the Caucasus.

All three were well-armed; the Cossacks with muskets and sabers, the young man with a pair of revolvers in his belt.

He was dressed in a semi-military rig, and carried a large field glass slung on one shoulder over a haversack, but did not look like a Russian, though it was in Russian of a kind—broken and imperfect—that he spoke to the man behind him.

"Well, Ostrof, we've lost the pickets and we can't do better than go into camp, I think."

Ostrof, the leading Cossack, brightened up instantly from the sulky look he had worn.

"Indeed, I think you are right, most high-born. If we straggle along in the dark we run a chance of stumbling on the Bashi Bozouks, and they would cut us to pieces for certain."

"Not you, Ostrof. You forget that I am the only Christian in the party. Surely they would not hurt you two Moslems."*

Ostrof grinned rather ruefully.

"Your excellency may be right; but neither Alei nor myself want to take the chance."

The young man came to a halt in a place where there was a level under the roots of a tree, about twenty feet.

"This is our camp," said he. "What have you got to eat?"

Ostrof reached into one of the saddle-bags that hung behind his horse, and said:

"If your excellency will promise never to tell any one, I have a young specimen of the unclean beast here. I took him from one of those Bulgarian Christian dogs, on whom may the Prophet's curse rest."

"And are you not afraid you'll catch it for violating the Koran, Ostrof?" asked the young man, laughing.

Ostrof grinned broader than before.

"If Alei and myself can eat it in the mountains, and your excellency is not afraid to keep a secret, no one will be any the wiser."

The young man laughed again.

"You are an old soldier, Ostrof, and eat whatever you can get. In my country we look on the swine as good food."

Ostrof glanced round him apprehensively before he answered:

"Between ourselves, most high-born, we of the Caucasus look on wild pigs as not coming under the Koran. This was a *wild* one; at least he ran away from us, which shows that he was not tame, and I had to shoot him. We can but pick his bones to get rid of him. An unclean beast should be destroyed, and it is the duty of a good Moslem to exterminate swine."

So saying, the Cossacks and their leader unsaddled their horses, took off the nose-bags hung at each saddle, fed the beasts, and began to light a fire.

This was an easy task in the wood; when the young man took from his saddle a small, sharp hatchet, saying:

"There, Ostrof, you've often wondered at my not carrying a sword. In my country we think swords have gone by since pistols have come in, but we believe in the hatchet for camp life."

Ostrof took the hatchet with a grin of delight, saying, as he began to hack chips:

"It must be a great country, that of you Americanetz. I have heard that the streets are paved with gold."

"A good many people think so, Ostrof, but they find out their mistake before they have landed long. Gold is no more plentiful than here, but we have one thing in America you don't know here."

* The Russian Empire has in its service many Tartars and Circassians who are Moslem by religion, after a fashion; but during the Turkish War they all remained faithful to the Government.

"And what is that, most high-born?" asked the Cossack, as the fire began to crackle and sputter in its first attempts to blaze.

"Freedom, Ostrof. Any man can do as he pleases in America, so long as he hurts no one else."

"But one has to obey the czar," interrupted Alei, the other Cossack, in a tone as if he had caught the American tripping. "Surely, you forget that, most high-born?"

"Not a bit of it, Alei. In America the people are the czar, and we elect a czar to obey the people, every four years."

Alei stared at him, and but for his politeness it is probable he would have expressed his disbelief in the assertion.

As it was, he began to cut up the sucking-pig which Ostrof had hidden in his saddle-bags, and sniffed frequently during the operation, in a manner which spoke louder than words, while the young American smiled to himself at the evident disbelief of his two followers in a republican form of government.

Within a very short time, thanks to the experience of the veteran campaigners, what had been a snowy nook in the mountains, sheltered only by a big rock and a clump of old oaks, became a cheerful little camp, with a blazing fire, over which steamed three tin cups of fragrant tea, while the campers were broiling pieces of the little pig on sharpened sticks.

Suddenly Ostrof turned his head quickly and ejaculated:

"Horses are coming! Stand to your arms!"

In a moment the meat was dropped; the Cossacks had picked up their muskets, and Hammond, the American, ran out of the circle of firelight into the shadow of a tree, an example followed by his men.

All three could distinctly hear the cracking of dry sticks under the hoofs of a horse, though they could see nothing, for the rider, whoever he was, had gone behind one of the rocks that surrounded the place. Whether he had seen their fire or not was a question, but as the hoofbeats came nearer they concluded he must have done so.

"Keep still," whispered the American to Alei, who was handling his musket in a way that indicated an intention to fire on any one at sight.

"It may be one of our own men after all."

Alei shook his head.

"It is a Bashi Bozouk scout, and they are all limbs of the devil. Let us shoot first and ask questions afterward."

"Not so," returned Ostrof. "The Americanetz high-born gentleman is right. It may be one of our own men, lost like ourselves. Anyway, it is but one man. Let us keep hidden till he comes up."

Alei sulkily grounded the butt of his musket.

"Have your own way, but if he brings on a whole regiment, don't say I didn't tell you."

They remained hidden, and the footsteps came nearer till they saw a horseman coming round the shoulder of a rock, his animal slowly picking its way, the rider letting the reins hang on its neck, as if he distrusted his ability to guide the horse on such rough ground.

The horseman wore a fur cap and long-furred overcoat, while the clink of a saber betrayed him as an officer.

He appeared to be looking apprehensively round him, and they saw him pull up and look at the fire doubtfully before he advanced.

The sight of the three tethered horses seemed to reassure him, however, for he dropped the reins again and they heard him say to the horse in Russian:

"*Poshol*," [go on].

Then they watched him come up to the fire, scrutinize the horses, and finally he called out:

"Hollo, you men! Where are you? Come out! Why do you hide?"

Ostrof immediately leaned out of the cover with his musket leveled, and cried:

"What side do you belong to?"

"Russia, of course," was the answer, as the stranger turned a very handsome face toward them and threw back his long fur coat to show a richly-braided uniform. "Who are you and what are you doing out here away from the pickets? Don't you know it's against the orders?"

He spoke in the severe tone of a man used to being obeyed, and Ostrof turned to the American, whispering:

"It is some great man. What shall we do?"

The American answered the question by coming out into the light of the fire and going up to the stranger, to whom he said:

"These men are my attendants, monsieur, and I am the American correspondent, Hammond, who has a pass from the grand duke to go where I will in the lines."

The stranger officer looked at him sharply.

"You're not in the lines at all. You're far outside of them. The Turkish outposts can't be very far over the mountains. Are you thinking of going to them to give information of our movements?"

Hammond colored slightly.

"I have never before been accused of being a traitor," he answered. "I started out to find General Gourkko with these Cossacks, and we

lost our way. We were getting ready for supper when we heard you coming."

The officer's face cleared up at once.

"Supper, did you say? That makes a difference. What have you got for supper?"

Hammond smiled.

"If you are hungry, it will taste well. We have a young pig, about enough for four of us, with economy."

"Then the sooner I discuss it with you the better, my friend," returned the strange officer throwing himself off his horse, which proved to be a very finely-bred animal. "One of you men feed the beast. There is corn behind the saddle. Now, Monsieur Hammond, where is that pig?"

He threw back his fur coat fully now, showing a gorgeous uniform, and Hammond recognized that his visitor must be one high in rank, from the careless superiority of his manner.

He seemed, however, to be a very pleasant and good-natured person, from the way in which he participated in the supper, and his conversation showed him to be a well-informed man.

He had a way of questioning that showed he was used to having his questions answered at once, and he began to talk to the American as soon as he had satisfied his appetite.

"What paper do you represent?" he asked.

"The American *Enquirer*, monsieur."

"Ah, indeed; I see it often. Who was it wrote the account of the first battle of Plevna?"

"I had that honor, monsieur. I beg your pardon—how shall I call you?"

The stranger smiled.

"You can call me Colonel Alexandrovitch. That is my name, Monsieur Hammond."

Hammond knew this to be an evasion of the truth. Alexandrovitch means simply "the son of Alexander," and has no reference to a surname.

"I read the account, monsieur, and it was a good one. You seem to have military lore in your head. You understand movements. How did you find out so much? I did not know you American correspondents were allowed access to information."

Hammond smiled in his turn.

"In my country, Colonel Alexandrovitch, we employ men who know their business, no matter where they come from. I was educated for a soldier at a place called West Point."

"Indeed? Why did you not stay in America?"

"Because there is no room for soldiers in my country. We have no wars there."

"Aha! yes, I have heard, however, from a brother of mine, that you had a great war there, not long ago."

"So long ago, monsieur, that we have nearly forgotten it. I was a child then."

"And how came you here?"

"I came to complete my military education, and to learn what you Russians had to teach."

The colonel seemed to be pleased.

"That is right. And have you learned much?"

"In warfare, yes. But I see that you have learned a good deal from us."

The colonel looked interested.

"Indeed? How?"

"In the way in which you have used your cavalry. General Gourkko has taken them out away from the army, just as our own cavalry leaders did, during the war, and I predict, monsieur, that this war will be ended very soon now."

"You are right, Monsieur Hammond. But tell me, how do you like Russia?"

"I have seen but little of it, colonel; but I see already that it needs something."

"And what is that?"

"Freedom," said Hammond emphatically.

The Russian officer frowned contemptuously.

"Ah, bah! you are a foreigner, and do not yet understand our people. The Russians are born to obey, and need a master. Don't you know that they sent to Norway, a thousand years ago, to ask Rurik to be their king, and that none of their race has ever been elected to the throne, when a foreigner could be had?"

"I know it, colonel, and therein lies the whole mistake of Russian history. In America we believe in the sovereignty of the people."

They had been talking English ever since Hammond announced he was American, and the stranger talked very good English, while the two Cossacks munched their pork and sat apart, muttering to each other in the guttural Circassian which was their native tongue.

Colonel Alexandrovitch seemed to be provoked by Hammond's remarks.

"I tell you, monsieur," he said, "you don't understand our people. They adore a tyrant and would only drift into anarchy if left to themselves. It is all very well to talk as you do, out here in the wild Balkans, but I would recommend you not to ventilate democratic opinions at head-quarters. In Russia we have one God and one czar. The people have to obey both. See how happy and contented are our soldiers; how they have fought all through this war."

"That is true," returned Hammond, "but I think they would fight better were there more chance for a man to rise from below to the top

of the ladder. For example, colonel, it shows bad management on the part of the officers, that we four should be out here, between the two armies, and that no one stopped and turned us back. The Germans would have had such a picket line that nothing could have got through."

The colonel seemed to be struck by the remark, for he answered soberly:

"What you say is true. I came out myself on purpose to inspect the picket lines, and they are very careless. But what would you have? Our officers are not yet what they should be. Still, I would wager that with all our carelessness, if the enemy saw our fire and made a dash for us here, we should give a pretty good—"

"Bang! whizz! piou! ft!"

The crack of a rifle and the whizz of a bullet interrupted his speech, and the missile passed close to the speaker's head and slapped into the trunk of an oak behind him.

In a moment Hammond, the Cossacks and Colonel Alexandrovitch were on their feet and had run to cover behind the trees, just in time to escape a dropping volley of irregular shots that came from the summit of a ridge near by.

The volley was followed by a loud yell, as a number of dark figures came running down over the snow.

"Keep to cover," cried Alexandrovitch in perfectly cool tones. "There are only six of them. Give it to them when you can see their faces plainly."

The figures running down the mountain were wild-looking scarecrows, on foot, with long muskets, and Alei cried out:

"Bashi Bozouks!"

Alexandrovitch turned his head sharply.

"Keep your tongue still, fool. Let officers give orders. It is for you to obey. Don't fire till I tell you."

Alei seemed to be cowed by the rebuke, for he immediately pulled in his musket, with which he was taking aim.

A moment later the wild-looking men came within range and made a dash for the fire—for the horses, which were struggling and kicking.

"They think we have run," muttered the colonel to Hammond. "Now give it to them."

With that he and the American leveled their revolvers and opened fire with such rapid precision that, inside of half a minute, three Bashi Bozouks had fallen dead, another lay on the snow with a broken leg howling "*Amaun! Amaun!*" [mercy, mercy], and the other two were running away from tree to tree, dodging the bullets, and pursued by the two Cossacks, firing at them.

Then Colonel Alexandrovitch said to Hammond:

"You see we Russians can fight as well as ever. But we've made too much noise. Hark! what's that?"

The loud clear note of a trumpet from the side toward the Russian pickets warned them that intruders were near, and they soon after heard the rapid tramp of a whole troop of cavalry coming up to the place where they were, full trot.

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL ALEXANDROVITCH.

THE two Mussulman Cossacks ran to their horses and hastily began to saddle up, when Colonel Alexandrovitch called out:

"Leave those horses alone. I'm responsible for this post. They are hunting for me."

Hammond, on hearing this, quietly blew the smoke from his pistol, and began to clean and reload it, just as the pennons of a troop of cavalry came in sight below them, and a party of forty or fifty Cossacks of the Caucasus made their appearance, toiling up the hill.

When they reached the camp Colonel Alexandrovitch stood by the fire with his fur coat open, and nodded frigidly in answer to the respectful salutation of the captain of the troop, who said:

"Thank God we have found your highness. I feared the Bashi Bozouks had you."

Colonel Alexandrovitch laughed carelessly.

"The Bashi Bozouks have a great name, but they don't amount to much, Goryautchikoff. How did you come to lose me?"

"It grew so dark we lost the track of your highness's horse," answered the captain of Cossacks, to which Alexandrovitch retorted:

"Pretty trackers your men must be. If I had not come on this gentleman I might have starved. Where's General Gourkko now?"

Goryautchikoff pointed off to one side.

"Out yonder, your highness. The whole corps has passed the gap and there are no signs of the enemy. We have surprised them completely, beyond a doubt."

Alexandrovitch nodded and turned to Hammond briskly:

"What say you, monsieur? I have enjoyed your hospitality, and, upon my word, the pork was good. Will you ride with me to Gourkko's head-quarters, where I can promise you better fare and a tent bed to sleep on?"

Hammond hesitated.

"The fact is," he said in a low voice, "I am in a dilemma, monsieur. You are, I begin to perceive, a prince of the blood, and I must throw myself on your indulgence. It is against the orders for me to be where I am; but we Yankee newspaper men take great risks to get news."

The colonel smiled quizzically.

"And you think if you get to Gourkko's head-quarters, you may be sent to the rear?"

"Frankly, I do."

"Be under no apprehension. I will see that you remain."

"But, perhaps, however willing monsieur might be—"

"I might not be able to keep you? Is that what you mean, sir? Well, in one sense you may be right. I hold no direct command in this army. I am not even supposed to be here officially. But—"

Here his face took on an expression of dignity and conscious power that impressed Hammond deeply as he pursued:

"When I wish a thing done it is generally done. You will come with me, and I will see that you are free to go where you wish, hereafter, on all occasions. I like you. You speak your mind boldly, and that is more than I can get a Russian to do. Here, you Cossacks, bring up them horses. Now, Count Goryautchikoff, forward!"

Five minutes later saw the young American, considerably mystified as to who Colonel Alexandrovitch could be, riding by his side at the head of the little troop of Cossacks up and down the ridges of the Balkans, in quest of General Gourkko's head-quarters.

He would have asked Goryautchikoff, could he have had a chance, but Alexandrovitch kept him in full conversation as they rode on, asking innumerable questions about America and its form of government, and seeming to aim at making the young man talk in the most ultra republican manner.

But Hammond, who was a shrewd newspaper man, had taken his cue already from what the other had told him, and refused to be drawn into any expressions derogatory to the perfection of the Russian form of government.

For all he knew, this Colonel Alexandrovitch might be deeply interested in the despotism of the czar, and able to send him to Siberia at a moment's notice.

When Alexandrovitch saw that he could not draw from the American any more frank expressions of opinion on points of civil government, he turned to military matters, and tried to get him to criticize the operations in which they had been engaged, but here also Hammond was equally cautious, and the colonel slapped him on the shoulder, remarking:

"You Yankee newspaper men are not to be caught I see, so easily, before other people. Well I'll see more of you some other time, and get you to talk more freely. Who has the advance to-morrow, Goryautchikoff?"

"General Koulikoff's division, highness."

"Koulikoff, my old prince of brutes! What say you, Mr. Hammond, to taking a ride with old Koulikoff to-morrow?"

"I should like it of all things," said Hammond frankly. "I know we must be near the best part of the Turkish army, and when they are gone the war's as good as over. I want to see Constantinople, colonel."

He saw Goryautchikoff give him a sharp look as he said "colonel," as much as to rebuke him for a liberty, but the colonel himself answered:

"Perhaps some of us may never see that Constantinople, Mr. Hammond, except as prisoners. You know we've cut loose from the army altogether, and may all be captured."

Hammond shook his head.

"It would take better troops and more of them than any in the Turkish army, to do that now. Whatever else I may have done, colonel, I did not come out with this column till I found out that it was capable of taking care of itself."

Alexandrovitch nodded and seemed impressed by what he said for he replied:

"Do you know I think you would make a good officer of Cossacks, after all if you were in our service. Did you ever think of entering it, Mr. Hammond?"

"No, colonel."

"Too much of a republican, eh?" asked the colonel, good-naturedly.

"Possibly so."

"Well, whenever you do, come and see me, and I'll see that you have a chance, Mr. Hammond. Here we are at head-quarters."

Indeed they began to see the twinkling red lights ahead that told of a camp, and very soon afterward were halted by a big dragoon on a still bigger horse, who towered up in the road and challenged them in a voice of thunder.

"Pretty soon after that, they rode into a camp no one would have suspected to exist, so cunningly was it hidden in the passes of the mountains.

Nevertheless, as Hammond rode in he became convinced that the great body of the Russian cavalry was here, at least twenty thousand strong, the horses snugly ensconced in the valleys between spurs of the mountains, in thickets of fir trees, where they were as warm as if in a stable, while the fires were all kept under the

shelter of rocks, and not till one was in the midst of them, did one realize that a perfectly disciplined army was hidden in the heart of the Balkans.

Colonel Alexandrovitch rode on through the midst of the camp till he saw a large fire standing by a fire with a group of officers by it, when he said to Goryautchikoff:

"You need come no further. I will go on alone."

Hammond, on hearing this, reined up, when the colonel added, with a kind smile:

"But you must come with me. I wish to introduce you to Gourkko. Let your man go with Goryautchikoff."

Hammond followed him to the fire, where the mysterious colonel dismounted and was immediately greeted with marked respect by a dark, resolute-looking man, who was recognized by Hammond as Gourkko.

"Your highness is very welcome. I began to be uneasy at your non-appearance."

"Better late than never," responded the colonel, laughing. "General Gourkko, this gentleman is an American officer who wrote the account of Plevna which pleased us so much. I have appointed him a volunteer aid on my staff and you will please see that he is taken care of. He has found the enemy for us."

Gourkko saluted the American politely.

"You have found the enemy?" he asked.

"May I inquire in what force?"

"Only a roaming party of Bashi Bozouks, who seemed to have no horses," returned Hammond modestly. "They will, however, give the alarm if we do not push on. They are poorly armed, general."

"Which way did they come?" asked Gourkko.

Hammond pointed to the south, and Colonel Alexandrovitch added:

"If he had not been cut there, we should never have known it. My dear Gourkko, your patriots are careless. There we were, with a fire lighted, not three miles from you, and the enemy were the first to find us. Where is Koulikoff?"

"Prince Koulikoff is getting his column ready now to move out," returned the general, with some little hauteur of manner. "As for our patriots being careless, your highness, we can not send them far for fear of giving the enemy warning."

Alexandrovitch shrugged his shoulders.

"As you are aware, my dear general, I hold no command here, but only express my opinion. I think, when Koulikoff is ready, this gentleman and I will go with him."

"As your highness pleases, but it will be a long and hard march."

"I came to see what is to be seen, Gourkko, and so did this gentleman. You have no objection to our going?"

"Not in the least," said Gourkko stiffly. "Your highness is aware of the orders as to newspaper correspondents—"

"This gentleman is my aide-de-camp under my orders," interrupted Alexandrovitch; "and so exempt from the provision. What's that coming?"

They could hear the trample and clank of a marching column, and see it coming along the valley through the snow.

"That is General Koulikoff," said Gourkko.

Alexandrovitch turned to Hammond.

"Are you ready for a long night ride?"

Hammond looked at his horse carefully.

"I think so. My animal is pretty thin, but he has several days left in him yet."

The colonel nodded.

"That is true; but you need a better horse. You shall have one of mine."

He spoke a few words to a Cossack near by, and the man led out a handsome horse, to which he transferred Hammond's saddle, as the column of cavalry came up headed by a stout, red-faced old officer with white hair, and the general air of a hard drinker.

"Well, Koulikoff," called out the colonel, "are you ready to go to Constantinople?"

"Ay, ay, your highness," was the hearty reply.

"I only wish you could come with us. We'd show you what the Caucasus column can do at a pinch."

"I'm coming with you," replied Alexandrovitch. "If you'll wait till my aide gets his horse saddled, we'll be ready."

Koulikoff looked surprised.

"Is your highness really in earnest? We may have hot work very soon."

"That's what I want to see, Koulikoff."

As he spoke, the colonel swung into his saddle, Hammond followed, and the long column moved on out of the snow-covered valley, through dark gorges, where the blackness soon became profound, only illumined by the white carpet of the snow that marked the path.

Hammond dropped behind the general, who rode ahead with Colonel Alexandrovitch, and found himself among the officers of the staff, one of whom said, in a low voice:

"His highness must be fond of excitement to go out with a column like this, monsieur. The general ought to put his foot down and not allow it. If anything happened him, we should all be court-martialed."

"Why?" asked Hammond.

"Why? Can you ask? The czar expressly forbid the czarevitch to go into danger. What would become of Russia were he to get hurt?"

Hammond started slightly.

"What? Is that the czarevitch?"

His companion uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he asked:

"Didn't you know it, then? I thought you were with him?"

"So I am. We met by chance, and he said his name was Colonel Alexandrovitch."

"So it is, by my faith, but with a Romanoff at the end. How did you meet him?"

Hammond gave a short recital of his little adventure, and his companion observed:

"Well, you're in luck, and an Americanetz, too. Your fortune's made, if you stay in Russia, monsieur. His highness takes fancies, and they are said to last. Do you know where we're going, monsieur?"

"To find the Turks, I suppose."

"And where shall we strike them?"

"At Salonica, I think. They are there in some force, and from there to Adrianople we may expect fighting."

The Russian officer yawned.

"How do you know all this? For my part, I am content to obey orders, and ask questions when I've nothing else to do."

Hammond laughed slightly.

"I shouldn't wonder. What's your name, monsieur? My name is Hammond."

"And mine Koulikoff."

"Any relation to the general?"

Koulikoff gave a groan.

"Unfortunately, yes: his nephew."

"Why unfortunately?"

"Because he seems to think that, being my uncle as well as my general, he has a privilege to rate me all the time for such trifles as running into debt and fighting duels."

"That's very unreasonable."

"Yes, and that's not the worst of it."

"What is not the worst of it?"

Young Koulikoff lowered his voice.

"The old fellow has taken a young wife—too pretty, by half, for him, you know—and it's my belief he's jealous of me. Here I might have been sent home to St. Petersburg with dispatches, long ago, and seen some pleasure; but he keeps my nose down to work here on purpose to give me no chance. I believe I'll turn Nihilist some day to spite him."

"Nihilist? What's that?"

In those days of the war the name Nihilist had not acquired the power to which it has since attained, and Hammond was puzzled.

Young Koulikoff spoke still lower.

"The Nihilists are the regenerators of Russia and mankind. To-day no one knows them; but the time will come when you will see Russia a republic through their means."

"Indeed, monsieur?"

"Yes. It is war-time now, to be sure; but when it is all over, and we have given those Turks a good thrashing, then you will see we shall attend to our own affairs in Russia, and surprise you all."

Hammond made no reply. It was the first time he had ever heard such talk from a Russian.

Young Koulikoff seemed to be a light-hearted and empty-headed young fellow; for he soon dropped politics, and began to talk about the opera and St. Petersburg, with much grumbling at the imminent probability of having to spend the whole winter in Turkey.

The column toiled slowly along for the rest of the night, till the gray light of dawn crept over the scene, disclosing the soldiers nodding on their horses after the night march, while Prince Koulikoff and the young Czarevitch still rode in the van, conversing as they went.

As the sun rose, they emerged from a pass in the mountains, and saw before them a smiling champaign country, with patches of snow near the foot of the mountains, and brown fields and woods beyond, in the midst of which rose the domes and towers of a large town, at sight of which the young prince said to Koulikoff:

"Adrianople at last. In '29 its capture ended the war. May it be as good an omen for us."

He turned from Koulikoff to Hammond.

"Well, captain, yonder is Adrianople. How long before we reach it, and end this?"

Hammond had his glass at his eye, and looked long before he answered:

"Three days at least, colonel. I see a line of smoke, which looks like Baker Pasha, and we shall have a hard fight. But we shall win it."

CHAPTER III.

THE NIHILISTS.

DIMITRI MIKALITCH BAKLOUSHIN was a Russian *moujik*, who made his living as an *ish-rostchik*.

That is to say, in "United States," he was a peasant and a hack-driver in the great city of St. Petersburg.

Nobody ever called him by his full name—Dimitrius, the son of Mikail, Bakloushin—except at a festival, when all hands were drunk, and therefore very ceremonious and polite.

His brother hack-drivers addressed him as Mitri or Dimitka, and his patrons who knew him shouted for Bakloushin or Bakloushka,

according as they were in a hurry or good-natured.

Bakloushin kept his "drosky" at a stand on the Newsky Prospect, which runs all round St. Petersburg by the Neva, opposite the Hotel de l'Amerique, a place he had found by experience to be the best in St. Petersburg for getting big fees from foreigners, if one could only talk a little English.

And Bakloushin had learned to jabber with such fidelity to Fulton market nature, that more than one American had given him a rouble at a time to be carried back to the days of his youth by hearing New York slang from the mouth of a Russian hack-driver, delivered with such innocence of manner that it was evident Bakloushin did not understand what he was saying.

Mitri Bakloushin was a Russian to the backbone, and believed in Russia as the one perfect country in the world. He adored the czar, went to church regularly, got drunk on Saints' days, drinking healths to all the hierarchy of the calendar, and detested a Nihilist as an emissary of the devil.

Reading and writing Bakloushin looked on with awe, as things that came as a gift from Heaven. For himself, he never dared aspire to such abstruse sciences, yet he could give you the name of every street in St. Petersburg, and never missed the number of a house he was told to drive to at any time.

In short, Mitri Bakloushin was a queer mixture of simplicity and innate shrewdness, superstition and knowledge of human nature, found in perfection in Russia, and in very few places elsewhere.

Mitri's stand was by the Hotel de l'Amerique, but he knew the days when the boat from Hamburg came in as well as if he took the paper regularly, and he always went down to meet it and get a fare, by dint of shouting in English:

"All right, all right! Got 'Merican Hotel! Right away! Go ahead! All right!"

He did not know what it all meant, but he knew it had an effect and always got him a fare against the other drosky drivers, who had not taken the precaution to learn such a piece by heart.

On the day when we first came on Mitri, some years after the end of the Turkish war, he stood by the pier as the passengers were coming ashore, yelling his usual formula, when a tall, handsome young fellow, in clothes never made in Russia, elbowed his way through the crowd and stepped into Mitri's drosky, carrying a valise, which he deposited between his feet, and said to Mitri, in very fair Russian:

"Come, why don't you get in and drive me to the hotel? Which is it?"

Mitri was not surprised to hear a stranger talk Russian, but he was a little disappointed, for foreigners who know Russian are not apt to be so free with their cash as total strangers, but he answered with his usual politeness:

"To the American Hotel, most high-born one, but I hope your resplendency will not take advantage of your slave."

The young stranger laughed, saying:

"You can cheat me as much as you like, Nikolai. I'm going to hire you for the whole day."

Mitri made a low salute.

"I knew your excellency must be a prince at least. Where shall I drive?"

"First to the hotel. Are the fleas as thick as ever in the rooms, Nikolai?"

Mitri drew himself up.

"Your lordship is mistaken. My name is not Nikolai at all, but Mitri Bakloushin, and there are no fleas in the hotel to speak of."

"That depends on one's powers of speech, Mitri. I've been here before. Drive on."

The stranger threw himself back into the corner of the drosky, and Mitri drove him to the hotel, where he curtly said:

"Wait till I come back."

Then he vanished into the hotel and Mitri waited outside in a hot sun and clouds of dust—for it was July, a year ago—and wondered to himself who was this young man who was so foreign in his dress and yet talked Russian and seemed to know all about Russian fleas.

In about half an hour the young man came out, so transformed that Mitri did not know him, for he wore an *officer's uniform*. Mitri's heart sunk into his boots instantly, for it is the custom of officers in Russia to curse and kick the hack-driver who presumes to ask for his pay, unless they are drunk and consequently free with their money. Dimitri, therefore, disliked and feared military passengers.

But as he took a second glance at his new fare he took heart again, for he perceived that the uniform worn by the young stranger was that of no Russian regiment at all, but of foreign cut and color. And foreign officers, coming to St. Petersburg, are apt to be as lavish of their money as the Russian military blades are stingy.

The young stranger flung himself on the seats of the drosky, and Mitri said, politely:

"To what illustrious place shall I drive you, most high-born one, and how shall I address your resplendency?"

The young man laughed.

"You're a sly dog, Mitri, and ask a good many questions at once. You can call me kaptan; I am an Americanetz, and I want you to drive me to Gatschina."

Mitri held up his hands in amazement.

"To Gatschina, most high-born! Why, it is ninety versts there and back!"

The young captain seemed to be a little surprised at the answer, for he said:

"I thought it was near by. Isn't there a palace there, where his highness the czarevitch resides?"

"Yes, most high-born one; but one goes there in the train."

"Then drive me to the station. I wish to go there. Stay, Mitri, you may know what I want to know. Is his highness there now, or has he come to town?"

Mitri was in his element when asked for information about great people.

"His imperial highness was at the summer palace only yesterday, most high-born one; but he is to go away to-day by the train, at noon, to Gatschina."

"Exactly what I want!" cried the young captain, delightedly. "I may meet him at the station in all likelihood."

Mitri rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"That will be difficult, most high-born."

"Difficult? Why?"

Mitri seemed a little embarrassed.

"Of course your excellency is aware, most high-born, that even princes cannot approach the heir of all the Russias without a proper presentation from the officer attending."

"Is that all?" said the captain, lightly.

"Bah! that's nothing, Mitri. I know them all. Come, get upon the box and drive to the station."

Mitri was stricken with so much awe at the impudence of a foreigner who said that he "knew them all"—meaning the high and mighty officers of the Imperial Court, that he could find no answer, so he got on his box and drove away toward the station of the railroad without another word, feeling dazed.

Who in the world could this American captain be, who was familiar with the officers of the court?

Mitri kept glancing over his shoulder as he drove, and saw that his fare had a bold, careless look on his handsome face, and stared as if he owned all St. Petersburg.

Perhaps this was the reason why Mitri did not mind where he was going as well as he ought to have done, and in turning a corner nearly ran the pole of his drosky through the side of a large open carriage, with a coat of arms and a coronet on the panels, at which the young captain rapped out an American oath, which was followed by a scream from the carriage, as a very handsome lady threw herself to the other side of the seat, while the driver began to curse Mitri for "dog's flesh," "offspring of a swine," and many other choice Russian epithets, informing him that the executioner would cut him into small pieces and feed him to hounds.

In the midst of all this, the lady, who had recovered her composure, called out to her man:

"Be quiet, Mikailka. Be quiet."

Then the young officer in the drosky rose and took off his helmet, while he made, in his best Russian, an apology for the carelessness of his servant, and the lady looked him full in the face and smiled in a way to show the whitest of teeth, as she said:

"Pray do not mention it, monsieur. You are a stranger, I perceive—French?"

"No, madame, American."

And he handed to her, with his best bow, a card on which was printed:

CAPTAIN J. H. HAMMOND,
Late U. S. A.

The lady looked at the card and then at the handsome owner with great apparent interest. The carriages remained stationary till the great people had finished their talk.

"Were you not in the Turkish war?" she asked, with animation, "at our quarters?"

Hammond bowed, smiling.

"I had the honor to be attached as extra aide-de-camp to the staff of his highness, the czarevitch, madame."

The lady brightened still more.

"I thought I remembered your name. And you were a great friend of my poor dead kinsman, General Shoboleff. I've often heard him speak of you. He was my cousin. I am the Princess Koulikoff. You must have met my poor husband. You know he was killed."

Hammond looked at the princess with great secret admiration. He remembered old General Koulikoff well, the red-faced, white-haired, irritable old tyrant, with the one virtue of bulldog courage, and wondered how he ever managed to get such a pretty young wife—now a widow—as he saw before him.

Possibly the lady divined some of his thoughts, for her color brightened perceptibly, and she waved him a smiling adieu, saying:

"You must make a point of calling on me as soon as possible. I shall expect you, Captain Hammond. Au revoir."

* Sixty miles—a verst being two-thirds of a mile.

Then the vehicles separated and Hammond's drosky turned down the street from which the princess had just come, finding that it led toward the railway station.

He noticed quite a little crowd of peasants and women gathered on the sidewalks, and asked Mitri:

"What are they waiting for?"

"To see our father the czar," said Mitri, carrying his hand to his fur cap. "God and the czar are the hope of the people."

Then they drove on to the station, Hammond watching the people with interest as he went, for he had not been in Russia for some time before, and then only on a flying visit, after the capture of Adrianople.

They looked comfortable and well fed, rather stupid than otherwise, but by no means of the discontented aspect he had expected to find, since the talk about Nihilists was so rife.

He got out at the station, threw Mitri a five rouble piece, and was about to enter and buy his ticket, when he heard the people begin to cheer.

Looking back, he perceived the gleaming swords and helmets of the Life Guards, coming down the street, in front of an open carriage.

"It is the czar," cried Mitri, whipping up his horses to get out of the way, and then down came the Life Guards, at full trot.

They were not fifty feet from Hammond, when he saw a broad flash in the midst of the street, and down went two guardsmen in the dust, horses and all.

Then came flash after flash, a confusion of sharp stunning reports, the street full of smoke, and Hammond saw the peasants beginning to run, while a Babel of cries and shouts arose.

Instinctively he drew his sword and ran toward the carriage in the smoke. He saw several dead horses, a group of men round a tall officer in dark green, then he saw a peasant throw something, that glittered in the sun, at the officer.

Another explosion, and the officer fell, horribly mangled, when Hammond seized the peasant and shouted:

"Surrender or I'll run you through!"

The man folded his arms, and answered:

"Kill, if you please. I've done what I came to do."

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER THE EXPLOSION.

FROM the moment the American seized the peasant, the explosions ceased, and several soldiers came rushing into the crowd, taking two other men, who were beginning to walk away, and who were seized on suspicion.

An officer came up to Hammond, who saluted him hurriedly and told him:

"This is the man who threw the last grenade. Who was it that was hurt?"

The officer was pale as death, and shook his head, saying in a low voice:

"Never mind. Don't speak of it now. My God! it is terrible, terrible!"

Then he seemed to recognize for the first time the strange uniform, adding:

"Who are you, monsieur?"

"American," said Hammond briefly. "I know his highness the czarévitch. I came to apply for entrance into your service, but this will change things. Who was hurt?"

The officer shuddered and whispered:

"His majesty. I fear it's all over. Hide it! Come with me and help."

They took with them the three captured men, who had assumed the stolid, impassive demeanor of the Russian peasant on trial.

In the midst of the street, beside the ruins of the carriage and the mangled horses, was a dense group of soldiers, and an officer was running off up the street, while the peasants were gathered on the sidewalks, staring stupidly at the scene.

As Hammond neared the group, he saw a white face in the midst of it, lying on the breast of a tall guardsman who had received a gash in the forehead, but appeared to be entirely unconscious of it, in his anxiety for the man he held in his arms.

Every one in the group looked pale and sorrowful, while more than one was sobbing in low tones.

Hammond knew the pale face, for he had seen it many a time in happiness.

It was the countenance of the man who, a few minutes before, had been the mightiest monarch in the world.

Now he lay in the arms of a common soldier, the blue tinge of coming death sweeping over his face.

All his power and guards had not been able to save him from the bombs of the Nihilist peasants.

"Is there any doctor here?" whispered the American to his new friend.

The Russian nodded.

"Yes; but he says it is no use," he whispered. "Both legs are mangled to pieces. He must die within a few hours."

Then they stood there silently, no one knowing what to say or do, till they heard the rapid tramp of feet at a run, and saw a party of infantry soldiers coming down the street, with a litter in front.

These soldiers came up, looking pale and excited, and the mangled body of the czar was laid on the litter and covered with blankets.

The sufferer lay white and unconscious all the time, and then the procession of armed men moved slowly off, away from the station of the train.

Hammond was drawing back, when his new acquaintance whispered:

"Don't go. What's your name? I'll tell the general you arrested the assassin. I am Count Gregory Goryautchikoff of the household staff."

Hammond told his own name, and Count Gregory nodded:

"I thought I knew your face. You were at headquarters before Adrianople. I wish we had met again on a more fortunate occasion, but it cannot be helped."

Then they walked on in the procession, the three prisoners following under guard of a dozen soldiers, whose lowering faces gave proof of the delight it would have given them to massacre the captives at once.

Slowly they traversed the streets, followed by the low buzz of a crowd that kept gathering as it went on, till they arrived at the Winter Palace and entered therein.

Then Hammond said to Count Gregory:

"Let me retire now. I am out of place. It upsets all my plans, but I feel that I am an intruder here."

"On the contrary," returned Goryautchikoff, "his majesty always liked Americans, and his highness will be fonder of them than ever now. You must stay till he comes."

Thus exhorted, Hammond remained with the officers in the anteroom, while the insensible autocrat was carried into an inner chamber, and the door shut on him.

Then Count Gregory introduced him to his friends as the American who had arrested the assassin, and Hammond found himself looked on as a hero.

"That ought to be worth a *polk** or a regiment, if you were in our service," remarked a gorgeous aide significantly; "but they tell me you American officers are able to live on your pay. I wish we could in our country."

"I came here," said Hammond, "with some idea of going into your service, if the opportunity came. In our army there is not much work left to do now. I have left it."

And he sighed slightly, for he was young and ambitious.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of trotting cavalry outside, followed by the clank of spurs, as a tall and powerfully built young man, with a full light beard and curly hair, came in, dressed in the uniform of the dragoons, and passed on to the inner chamber, while every one drew respectfully back to let him pass.

Hammond noticed that his face was white as a sheet and working with emotion, and he drew Goryautchikoff aside, whispering:

"It was the czarévitch, was it not?"

"Yes," whispered Goryautchikoff, with a strange look; "yes, and he begins to see the end of the pest now, I hope."

"What do you mean?" asked the American, surprised at the words.

"Never mind," said Count Gregory in a gloomy tone, "you'll know as much as the rest of us if you stay here long; and if not, there is no need of telling you."

They waited in the anteroom for a full half-hour, when the door of the inner room opened again, and an old officer, with the green sash of the medical staff, came out, accompanying a lady who leaned on his arm and appeared to be ready to faint.

Hammond noticed that the officers as she came out, drew back and glanced at each other in an apprehensive, nervous way, trying to peep through the open door.

"Who is that?" he whispered.

Count Gregory pressed his arm warningly. "S!" he said, almost inaudibly. "That is the witch of the palace. The curse of Ivan on her and all her brood."

Hammond was puzzled. The form of the lady was full of grace, and he caught a glimpse of a sweet, sad, dark-eyed face.

"The witch of the palace!" he echoed, "but who is she? what name?"

Count Gregory drew him to the end of the anteroom to say:

"Is it possible you never heard of Dolgorouki, the witch? She bewitched our gracious czar, and he was mad enough to think of making her czarina, and her children princes. Nay, he has done as much as he could. They are all in high places."

"And what did the czarévitch and the grand dukes think of that?" asked Hammond, to whom the name of the Princess Dolgorouki, morganatic wife of the czar, was not new.

Goryautchikoff shook his head.

"You'll find out soon enough. If they had

not been all quarreling about old and new, this might not have happened. Hush! some one comes out again. I think it's all over."

Indeed the door opened; but this time it was a civil officer, in a gorgeous velvet coat, who came out bearing a white wand.

"The grand chamberlain," whispered the aide. The grand chamberlain came out, looking very solemn, and extended his white wand, saying in a grave tone:

"Gentlemen, his majesty, Alexander II., Czar of all the Russias, has passed into the light of a blessed immortality in the arms of his son and successor, Alexander Alexandrovitch, now Alexander III. I bid you to cry, 'Long live the czar.'"

Every officer stood up, and all pronounced in unison the words, "Long live the czar;" but it seemed to Hammond as if the tone in which the words were spoken was one of gloom and doubt.

Then the chamberlain proceeded:

"His majesty wishes to say a few words to you all. You will remain here."

He retired to the inner room, and very soon after the new czar came forth, pale and grave, with a severe look on his usually good-natured, frank face, put on to hide the emotion he really felt.

"Gentlemen," he said in a husky voice, "I wished to see you all, to thank you for your devotion to my late father in his last hour; I am thankful to say that his majesty knew me, and spoke—"

Here he broke down a moment, but resumed, amid a dead silence.

"The czar spoke to me and commended to my care the lady who has just passed out. Hereafter the princess will be honored and respected, as my father's wife. You will remember this. For the present the imperial household will remain unchanged. I wish to see the officer who arrested the assassin. I am told he is a foreigner."

Count Gregory pushed Hammond forward, and the young czar scanned the American keenly saying:

"I have seen you before, sir. Where?"

"I was sent by the American *Enquirer* to observe the Turkish war at imperial headquarters, sire," said Hammond. "I had the honor of serving with your majesty as extra aide-de camp to Colonel Alexandrovitch."

A faint smile crossed the czar's face. "I remember you now well. We had a little adventure together. Please to follow me. I am going to my cabinet. I want to speak to you. For the rest of the day, gentlemen, I wish to be alone."

He passed out of the room, and Hammond followed, noticing as he went more than one envious and malignant glance, but not thinking much of it.

Outside he found the corridors full of soldiers under arms, lining the walls and staircases, and as soon as the new czar made his appearance there was the clash of presenting arms, and a cry in unison:

"God preserve the czar."

The young emperor looked at the soldiers, and his face flushed slightly as he answered:

"God preserve my children. This is a sad day for me; but Russia never dies."

Then he went up the broad marble staircase, followed by Hammond, and entered a large and lofty cabinet, full of desks and papers that seemed to have but just been abandoned by the last occupants.

There was but one door, with a sentry at it, and to him the czar said:

"Make your beat at the end of the passage, and tell your sergeant to let none disturb us till I call."

The man presented arms and wheeled round to take his place, when the young czar threw himself into a chair, covered his face with his hands and groaned out:

"Oh, my God! This is a terrible day. You saw it all, sir. Tell me about it. Spare nothing."

Thus urged, Hammond began:

"I hardly know that I can tell your majesty anything valuable, but—"

"But tell me all you know. You are an American and I can trust you. I know you. You are not like these Russians. You will tell me the truth, will you not?"

"I certainly will, sire, if your majesty will tell me what you want to know."

"I want to know who you are, how you came here, how you happened to be in the street when that terrible thing happened? Tell me all—whom you met, and all."

The czar seemed to be overcome with some emotion other than the horrible death of his father, and Hammond answered:

"I came here on purpose to see your majesty and ask admission into the Russian service, there being little opening in my own country for a soldier. I heard that you were going to Gatchina, so I drove to the station on the chance of seeing you there and recalling myself to your memory. I saw the guards come down the street, and heard that his majesty, your father, was expected. Then I saw an explosion, ran into the crowd, saw a man throw a bomb into a

* *Polk*. A regiment of Cossack cavalry. The Cossack troop or company is called a *sotnia*, the regiment of twelve sotnias a *polk*, the colonel a *Polkovnik*.

group of officers, arrested him, and that is all I know, sire."

The czar listened attentively, and when the American had finished, asked:

"And did you meet no one on the way; can you think of no clue? These people had some head. These ignorant peasants acted under orders. The plot was well laid. Did you see no one drive away?"

Hammond hesitated.

"I met a lady, sire, by accident. My drosky ran into her carriage. It was the Princess Koulikoff."

The czar sighed slightly, saying:

"And that was all? Well, it cannot be helped."

CHAPTER V. THE NEW CZAR.

A SHORT silence ensued in the cabinet, and the American began to feel embarrassed at being alone with the first man in the empire of Russia, when the czar spoke:

"Captain Hammond, I remember you very well. You are the officer who shared the contents of his haversack with me in the Balkans, when I had lost my way in reconnoitering the Turkish outposts. We had quite a long talk, and you told me about your free institutions in America. I told you then that they would not do for our Russians. The nobles would hate them; the peasants could not comprehend them. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the picture, and when the war was over, in common with other visionaries, I had dreams when my time came of extending the benefits of freedom to all my subjects. You see now to what it has come. Sir, you wish to enter our service, you say. Do you know what it means henceforth?"

"The same as it always has, sire," said Hammond, quietly. "Russia is in a transition state. She may be the greatest nation in the world, if guided aright."

The czar frowned slightly.

"Do you mean toward a republic?"

"No, sire. Russia is not ready for one yet, and may not be for centuries. But your people may be free. Your gracious father lived long and happily from giving freedom to the serfs."

"And now, where are all the millions that swore they loved him?" asked the czar bitterly. "I tell you, sir, over his deathbed I swore to avenge him on these fantastic revolutionists; and it is on you—on you, sir, that I depend for the fulfillment of the vow I have made."

"On me?" asked Hammond, starting.

"Yes, on you," retorted the czar obstinately. "You say you wish to enter our service. Well, I promise you such a position as you never dreamed of in your wildest hopes. I will make you my confidential aide-de-camp. You shall be a colonel at once and a general if you succeed in the task I will give you. I will make you a count. You shall have money unstinted. But—"

Here he lowered his voice and looked as if he were struggling hard with his passion.

"You must rout me out these Nihilists who have murdered my father. You must find out who they are, and give me their names. When you have done that, you shall do any thing you please in Russia. Come, do you or not accept the offer?"

Hammond hesitated.

"Do I understand your majesty to offer me a place as a police spy?"

The czar shook his head.

"No, no. Spies? Bah! They are useless. I am surrounded with them. So was my father. And you see what happened to-day. No; I am sick of them. They eat up the taxes and do no good. Who knows? Nihilism may be rampant among them all. No; you are to be my aide. I will send you where you please. You are to find out who these men are, and see that I am not taken off as he was. I will give you the position of *polkownik*, that is a cavalry colonel in my Cossacks, you know, with eighteen thousand roubles a year, and you are to find out who are my foes and preserve me from them."

"But does your majesty consider that I am a stranger?"

"I do. Were you a Russian, I would not make the offer."

"But I have no means of finding out anything, sire. I feel helpless."

"That is my business. I know what I do well enough. As a foreigner, I can trust you."

"But your majesty will at least deign to give me specific instructions."

"I will. All I ask you to do is to obey my orders no matter how strange they seem, and to report to me everything you see and hear, no matter how trivial. I may send you to all sorts of places and you may have to encounter all sorts of dangers. For the last time, do you accept the offer?"

Hammond bowed low before the czar.

"Sire, I accept with gratitude."

The face of the young emperor seemed to clear up from the clouds that had covered it, as he answered more cheerfully:

"It is what I expected. Wait a moment."

He went to one of the desks, pulled out some

papers and rummaged over them till he found what he wanted, when he wrote rapidly for a short time, and then beckoned to Hammond to come to him.

"What is your full name?" he asked.

"John Hargreave Hammond, sire."

The czar filled in the name in a large emblazoned parchment, and handed it to him.

"Your patent of nobility," he said briefly.

"It makes you a Russian subject, remember, but it gives you a position. You are hereafter Count Ivan Ammonoff. Here is your commission, as a personal aide to myself. It entitles you to access to me at all times. Here is an order on General Mikailoff, paymaster-general, for ten thousand roubles for your outfit and expenses. As my aide, you are colonel of the first regiment of the Red Cossacks of the Guard, but will not assume command till I give you orders to that effect. Now, you will go and provide yourself with the proper equipments and horses. You are expected to mingle freely in society, and to report to the minister of war your appointment at once. At the end of a week come to me at Gatschina, and tell me all you have seen and heard. That's all, sir."

He assumed a cold and distant air, which showed to Hammond, plainer than words, that his interview was over, and the young man bowed himself out of the cabinet in a state of bewilderment that made him wonder whether it were not all a dream, as he slowly descended the staircase.

He saw his friend Goryautchikoff, the only friendly face visible, and made his way to him, where he stood in the midst of a group of officers, to ask him where to find the paymaster-general, minister of war and other dignitaries.

When he showed to Count Gregory the two broad parchments he had received, the other congratulated him cordially, saying:

"I'm glad of it. Now you are one of us, and these fellows will not be able to sneer at you, Colonel Count Ammonoff. I'll show you all you need to know."

Accordingly the rest of that day was passed by Hammond in a round of visits with his friend Count Gregory, and when it was over he found himself installed in a wing of the palace in handsome rooms, with several fine horses at his orders in the stables, and the tailors hard at work on his uniforms.

Then Count Gregory said:

"Come, there will be no pleasure anywhere now for several days, till the lying in state and the funeral are over, and you will not be wanted, nor shall I, this evening. What say you to a little expedition to see some friends?"

"With all my heart," said Hammond, and he remembered the instructions he had received from the czar, which he had kept to himself. "But will not the town be in mourning?"

Count Gregory gave him a singular, doubtful, inquiring look.

"Do you think so, Ammonoff? Well, you will not be so innocent after awhile. Where shall we go to-night?"

Hammond remembered his little adventure, and asked:

"Do you know the Princess Koulikoff?"

"Do I know her? The fascinating widow who has turned more hearts than any woman in Petersburg except the Dolgorouki? Why, yes. But surely you do not."

Hammond told him of the collision between the carriages, and Count Gregory exclaimed:

"They say you Americans have the luck of the devil himself. Here have I been wasting my time and periling my limbs to please this capricious creature, without success, for a year, and you have fallen into her good graces at the first day. Did you say she invited you to call at her palace?"

"She did to-day, but I should hardly like to intrude upon her."

"Say no more, my friend. You are a Yankee, and Yankees are credited with boldness and with not knowing our Russian ways. You shall go, and I will go with you."

"You know the princess then?"

"Yes and no. I have been hopelessly in love with her for three months, and we have spoken and danced together at the imperial balls; but I have never ventured to enter her house."

"Then had we not better wait—"

"Not a bit of it. I shall lay it all on you. Leave the management to me and only promise not to interfere with me."

Hammond shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please. We go in plain clothes?"

"By no means. You are green yet here. If we went in plain clothes, we should be stopped by the police and the *dworniks*, before we had gone three streets."

"And who are the *dworniks*?"

"The door-keepers of the great houses. They all belong to the police, and are bound to report every visitor and arrest every suspicious person. You must understand that after a thing such as happened to-day, the only people not suspicious are officers in uniform."

"But I have no uniform but my old one, the American."

"So much the better. Americans are above suspicion. Were you a German now, or a Frenchman, there might be trouble. Come, let

us go. The princess lives only a few streets from the palace, and has the reputation of being a center of gayety. True, to-night she may be alone for appearance' sake, as being a prominent member of the Old Russians."

"And who are the Old Russians?"

"Those who hate the Germans. You know we Russians are always changing. One czar is a furious hater of all things foreign and his next successor is crazy after foreigners. The poor czar just killed was German all over, after his mother and the late zarina. I wonder sometimes how I myself ever was put on the household staff, when I am one of the old Slavonian Russians, without a drop of German blood. The present czar, on the contrary, hates Germans, and we expect a general overturn, if the Nihilists do not remove him before he has done what we are sure he is going to do. The Koulikoff ought to be a conspicuous figure in the new court, if she plays her cards well."

They went out, Goryautchikoff summoned his brand-new English cab, with a big high-stepping horse, of which he was very proud, and drove round several streets till they stopped in front of a large iron gate before a court-yard, at the end of which they saw a large house, dimly lighted.

"This is the Koulikoff's house," said Count Gregory; and they got out of the cab, while the smallest of "tigers" jumped down to hold the horse.

They rung a resounding bell, and a wicket opened in the big gate, when Gregory said:

"Is the princess visible to-night?"

"Give me the cards and I'll see," said the voice of a particularly surly personage, very different from what Hammond had heard among Russians, up to that time.

Count Gregory handed the cards through the wicket, and observed to Hammond as the man went away:

"These *dworniks* are all the same since the police have set them to watch their masters. But a few roubles will quiet them. Give him one as we pass in."

CHAPTER VI. THE PRINCESS.

PRETTY soon the surly door keeper came back and admitted the two gentlemen, when both dropped some money into his open palm, with the result of changing his manner in a moment to that of obsequious politeness, as he ejaculated with many bows:

"The gracious princess will receive you both, most high-born ones, and Vassili Shapkin is only too much honored by being permitted to open the gate to your resplendencies."

He ushered them across a court paved with big cobblestones, where he turned them over to a gorgeous *chasseur*, or upper servant, in a brilliant uniform, armed with a short sword with a gorgeous hilt.

The *chasseur* bowed very low and said in French with good accent:

"If the gentlemen will follow me, madame receives only a few friends in her boudoir this evening. We are in mourning, of course, like all the rest of the world."

He was a very handsome fellow, with courtly manners, quite unlike a servant, and his French was devoid of a trace of foreign intonation.

As they went forward, Count Gregory said to his friend in a low tone:

"That is the man they call 'The Marquis.'"

"Why?"

"Oh, from his manners. It is rumored that he is a person of some distinction in disguise. You know madame has the reputation of being an intriguer, I suppose?"

"No, I did not know it."

Goryautchikoff nodded, but said no more, for at that moment they were ushered into a charming boudoir, hung in pale blue, where they were received with languid grace by the Princess Koulikoff, who looked, to the eyes of Hammond, as beautiful as an angel; being tall, slender, fair-haired, blue-eyed, clad in long white robes, which left shoulders and arms bare, but sparkling with jewels.

Goryautchikoff at once began to say:

"Madame will pardon our intrusion when I say that my friend, Count Ammonoff, being a stranger in St. Petersburg, desired to know which was the most brilliant saloon in the city, and I ventured to bring him here, trusting that an act of charity to a stranger might cover my own misdeeds."

The princess smiled—and she had a very charming smile—as she answered:

"Count Ammonoff needs no introduction to me, monsieur. We have met before. But was it fair, count, not to tell me that you were a Russian, this morning?"

Hammond colored and stammered:

"But I was not one this morning, madame. His majesty has seen fit to make one of me for a trifling service—an accident—that's all."

"Accidents have served you well to-day," said the princess, looking at him with a strange expression. "I am told you were near by when the czar was removed."

"I was near to the assassin who killed the czar and many innocent people besides," answered Hammond, with some emphasis. "It

was a terrible responsibility assumed by those rash men, madame."

"For which they will suffer," returned the lady, quickly. "Have they made any confession, count, or do you know, Goryautchikoff?"

"I heard that when questioned they gloried in their guilt," returned Goryautchikoff, with a scarcely perceptible sneer. "The leader who threw the bomb that did the business, laughed when they asked him the cause of his treason, and answered that he took his orders from the Brotherhood of Liberators."

"Brotherhood of Assassins he should have said," interrupted Hammond warmly. "It is almost incredible to me that men and women could be found who believe that any permanent good can come from such horrible murders of innocent people. What had the czar done to be killed like a dog?"

Goryautchikoff stared at him but made no answer, and the princess waved the young officer to a seat at her side on the sofa, murmuring:

"It is refreshing to see so much enthusiasm. Are all the men from your land so full of love for the czar?"

"No," returned Hammond more coolly, "we want all the world to be republican, as we are, but we don't propose to blow them to pieces if they disagree with us. We trust to public opinion to remedy evils."

Here Goryautchikoff, who had taken his seat at a little distance, shifted uneasily and coughed in a peculiar way, and the princess raised her head, saying:

"Monsieur Goryautchikoff, are you aware that Baroness Nastasya Boulkin holds a seance of mesmerism to-night?"

Goryautchikoff started.

"No, indeed, madam. Where?"

"You must promise to go there, or I cannot tell you," answered she. "You know the rule that binds us."

"I will go with pleasure, if you desire it," answered he emphatically.

"I do. Besides, I wish to talk to Count Ammonoff. He was with the general at the time of his death, and I have questions to ask."

Goryautchikoff stood up, as if on parade.

"I am ready," he said. "Give me the orders."

"They are at three, eighty-seven, six," was the enigmatical reply, and Count Gregory, at once advanced, kissed the finger-tips of the princess, and said to Hammond:

"Good-by, comrade. I shall not see you till to-morrow; for the baroness insists on all her visitors joining the circle, and it is very hard work. I'll leave the cab."

"Do no such thing," interrupted the princess. "I shall send Count Ammonoff home in my own carriage. Good night."

Goryautchikoff bowed himself out and the princess remarked to Hammond:

"He is a good fellow, the count, but stupid. I sometimes think they all are."

"Have you known him long?" asked Hammond, not knowing what else to say.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Who can tell? We meet these men in society, but what would you? They are all Russians, and that is all we can say. Have you not ever remarked, my dear Ammonoff, how close these Russians are to barbarians?"

"These Russians? I hardly know how to answer, madame."

"Why, monsieur?"

"Are not you a Russian?"

She smiled rather scornfully.

"Oh no, monsieur, I come from a race that has no Tartar taint in their blood. I am a Swede, pure and simple. One of my ancestors helped beat Peter the Great at Narva, and we never feared the Russians at less odds than five to one."

He noticed that she spoke of the Russians with some contempt, and he observed:

"Then you do not belong to the Old Russian party, as they call it here?"

"Who has told you of the Old Russians?" she asked, half closing her eyes and looking at him in a sidelong manner.

"Oh, I have heard of them, how they hate all foreigners, and that the present czar is said to belong to them, but I cannot believe that."

"And why not, monsieur?"

"Because his first official act has been to appoint me, a foreigner, on his staff."

"You are then on his staff? In what capacity?"

"As personal aide—"

And then Hammond suddenly pulled up and began to think to himself what was it this lady wanted to know of him.

"Pardon me," he said, "I forgot that you have no interest in me."

"On the contrary I have a great interest in you. I wish to ask you ever so many things," said the lady with vivacity. "You forget that you told me how you were with the poor dear general, when he was killed."

"Not when he was killed, madame, I had but a slight acquaintance with General Koulikoff. I saw his body when it was brought in from the front, that was all."

"Never mind; you saw that," returned the

lady obstinately, "and I want you to tell me about it. How was he killed? At the head of his men?"

"I heard so, madame. He fell with the utmost courage and glory."

"And you were at that time attending on—"

"On the czarevitch, madame."

"But you met the czarevitch by accident, is it not so?"

Hammond was surprised.

He had thought the little adventure of a few years before entirely unknown to all but himself and the present czar.

However, he replied:

"Yes, we met by chance. I was out on duty and lost my way in the mountains, with two men, when an officer rode up to the fire and shared all the food I had that night in the snow. I did not know who he was till some hours later when we rejoined the army. He, like myself, had been lost in visiting pickets."

"And naturally he referred to the incident to-day?"

"He did, madame. I feared he had forgotten it."

"Oh, no, he will not forget it," she retorted with a curl of her red lip. "It is a novel sense for a prince to go about incognito, and hear a man talk republicanism."

Hammond started.

"How do you know I talked republicanism?"

"Because you're an American and their ideas are well known. See here, my dear count, do you know you ought to belong to the Progress Party of Russia?"

"I do already, if there is such a thing, madame. I am in favor of progress. To what party do you belong?"

She laughed carelessly.

"I? To none. Women have no parties. We have no votes. Why should we interest ourselves in the struggles of politics? And so he made you a count and a colonel. You are in luck, Ammonoff, and so is he."

"Why, madame?"

"Because he has gained a good servitor," said she with sudden earnest gravity. "It needs no great discernment to see that you are a man who knows what he is about, count. By the by, do you ever go to the opera?"

"When I can, madame, and Patti sings."

"Well put in. But I am a Swede, and I prefer Nilsson. However, we shall have no opera for some time now and nothing but mourning I suppose. His majesty—his new majesty I mean—will probably go to Gatschina."

"I believe so, madame."

He answered reservedly, and the lady began to laugh, as she said gayly:

"I declare, the man is afraid to speak to me now, for fear of betraying state secrets. Why, we all know that he is going to Gatschina, and he will bury himself there in the midst of his guards you'll see. The Nihilists ought to be proud that, with their little, feeble band, they have reduced the Czar of all the Russias to the condition of a man who trembles at every foot-step and starts at the turning of a lock. They are very wicked people of course, but it has its ludicrous side, this affair."

She spoke lightly, watching him furtively out of the corner of her eye, and he answered, sharply:

"I see little that is ludicrous in it, but one thing I know, princess."

"And what is that?"

"That they laugh best who laugh last."

The lady turned her head to look at him with a keenness she had not shown before.

"Indeed?" she said; "then you have hopes of crushing these wicked Nihilists?"

"Not only hopes, but a certainty, madame," he answered, rather proudly. "They have not had a Yankee after them yet."

She opened her eyes wide and suddenly put out her hand with a frank gesture.

"I like you, Ammonoff," she said. "You are not a Russian. You say what you mean. I am with you in your quest, and I assure you you will need a friend. You do not know the dangers which surround you."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOTTLE TEST.

WHEN Hammond or Ammonoff went home that night, though he rode in the carriage of the princess, and was surrounded with comfort and luxury, there was an uneasy feeling in his heart that he had done an imprudence in confiding, though ever so little, in the Princess Koulikoff, whom he had never seen before. He had an idea that the princess was an intriguer of some kind, and that she had succeeded in extracting from him information that he ought not to have divulged.

His conscience smote him so much that he was on the point of asking audience of the czar when he rose next morning, but he was deterred by the stir in the palace, and the knowledge that Alexander III. must have his hands full of public business.

Moreover, on this day commenced the lying in state of the body of the murdered czar, and the trial of the three Nihilists, into which he was summoned as a witness, so that, within a few

days, he had forgotten all about the lady, when she was recalled to his mind by his friend, Goryautchikoff, saying:

"Ah, by the by, Ammonoff, Princess Koulikoff is going to the Koulikoff estates to-morrow, and things are so slow round here that I am going to try and get a leave of absence to follow her."

"I thought you had never entered her house," said Ammonoff, dryly. "I'm sure you told me so the night we went there."

"True, true," returned Count Gregory, placidly, though Ammonoff could see he was lying. "But we've known each other a long time at other places, you know."

"So it seems. How did you get on at the Baroness Boulkin's mesmeric seance, for which you left me alone at the Koulikoff house?"

Count Gregory laughed carelessly.

"Did you see through that? Well, I saw she wanted to speak to you alone, and I am not of a jealous disposition, as you may see when I tell you that I bring you an invitation to pay a visit to Toulminka."

"And what is Toulminka?"

"The Koulikoff estate. Time was when it was worth a good deal of money, and the old general owned four thousand serfs. That's all gone now, but the princess is by no means a pauper, I can tell you."

"And where is this estate?"

"Near the Ural mountains, in the gold country. She has mines, they say, that bring in half a million roubles a year."

"Then you'd better go, my dear Gregory, and make love to the princess. Widows need bold wooers, you know."

Count Gregory sighed.

"She is an exasperating woman, Ivan. I never know how to take her. Why won't you come with me?"

"Because I've no right to ask for a leave of absence yet, having been only a few days an officer."

"Bah! That's nothing. The czarevitch—I mean his present majesty—won't want you. He is going to shut himself up at Gatschina, and see none but his family."

"So much the more reason for me to be with him, in case I'm wanted, count. Go on your leave and enjoy it."

Goryautchikoff shrugged his shoulders and went off, while Ammonoff proceeded to his room to array himself for the first time in his new Russian uniform, which had just come home from the tailor.

He could not help a self-satisfied glance in the mirror when he was fully attired, for the contrast between the severe simplicity of his old U. S. blue and the gorgeous attire of a colonel of the Red Cossacks, with the aiguillettes of an aide-de-camp falling over his breast, was enough to inspire vanity.

It struck him at once that it was his duty to call on the minister and ask for orders, for he had been lounging about for five days now, and the trial of the Nihilists was over, they having been condemned to death, so that there was nothing more to detain him in the palace.

Therefore, he ordered his horse and rode off through the streets, where he found everything looking about the same as usual.

The weather was hot and dusty; crowds lined the sidewalks and watched the racing of the droskies; the police were no thicker than usual, and nothing on the surface showed that a feeling of uneasiness was pervading society from top to bottom.

There were a good many officers riding about and one or two patrols of Cossacks passed by, the men walking their horses and looking sleepily at the crowds, as if they had no particular interest in life.

But as the newly-fledged colonel came near the buildings of the minister of war, he noticed quite a crowd of peasants in the street, and heard some shouting.

Presently as he looked, he saw the lances of a detachment of Cossacks coming through the crowd and saw it scattering.

The next minute he saw that the men had their lances slung behind them, and were using their whips on the people, with a merciless brutality peculiar to Cossacks on duty.

"What's the matter?" he asked one of the men, who scowled at first but saluted as soon as he recognized the uniform, and answered respectfully:

"They were crowding to stare, most high-born one, and our officer ordered us to disperse them."

Then he rode off, lashing furiously at an old peasant, who humped up his back under his sheepskin coat, roared at every blow, but evidently was not much hurt from the way in which he ran.

Pretty soon Ammonoff came on the officer in command, a square-built and determined-looking fellow, who told him:

"Oh, it was a mere nothing, my colonel, but we just took a man with some glass bottles in his pockets and arrested him on suspicion. And then the fools began to shout and groan, so I thought it best to give them a lesson."

"Indeed?" said Hammond, "and where is your prisoner?"

"The minister of war is interrogating him, my colonel."

Ammonoff thought the occasion a good one to enter, so he gave his horse to an orderly and entered the gorgeous building of the war department, where his name and rank procured him admission everywhere till he came to the private cabinet, where he was stopped by a sentry and told that he could go no further.

Before he could convince the sentry that he had a right to go in, the door opened and a stern old officer looked out, saying:

"What's this noise? Who is this?"

Ammonoff gave his name and rank, and the minister started slightly.

"Come in, come in," he said. "I've heard of you before. Come in."

Thus invited, Ammonoff entered the cabinet and found General Milutine alone, with three glass bottles on the table, to which he pointed, saying gravely:

"More of these infernal machines, I fancy. The man was brought in just now, and I had him searched to find these bottles. Are you anything of a chemist, colonel?"

"Somewhat, in the line of explosives," said the American, eying the bottles curiously; "but I fancy there is not much need of that in this case, general."

"Why not, why not?" asked the general.

"Because I think there is nothing in them more harmful than hair-oil," said the other, smiling. "See the label. 'Rowland's Macassar.' That's English hair-oil."

The general looked at them still more suspiciously, answering:

"That may be, but again it is strange that the man would answer no questions."

"Where is the man, general?"

"Locked up, of course. In these times one can't be too careful. I wish I knew—"

"Knew what, general?"

"How to find out what is in those three bottles on the table. I heard that you Americans are familiar with nitro-glycerine and know all about it."

"So we are, general."

"Then won't you analyze one of those bottles on the table for me?" said the general, in an eager tone.

"There's no need of that, general."

"Why not?"

"To analyze the contents, one would have to open the bottle, and if there is any infernal machine in the matter it lies in the opening of the bottle."

"Then how am I going to find out if there is or is not nitro-glycerine in them?" the general said, still more perplexed.

"Very simply, general."

As he spoke, Ammonoff took up one of these bottles by the neck.

"What are you going to do?" asked Milutine, horrified. "Do you want to blow us all up?"

"Not a bit of it, general."

"Then why do you take up the bottle?"

"To test it. If this is nitro-glycerine it will explode on concussion. I am about to throw this bottle out of the window. If it explodes when it breaks, you've done right to arrest the man; if it's only harmless hair-oil, we can let him go. There is a clear space below?"

"Yes, here, in the inner court," said the general, delightedly.

Ammonoff looked out and saw that the arsenal buildings were ranged round an immense quadrangle, with a fountain and flower-beds in the center, but there were too many soldiers lounging about to make it safe to throw the bottle, in case it should contain nitro-glycerine.

"We must order the men out of the court," he said to the minister.

"I'll send orders at once," said the general, and he called an officer, by whose means the court was cleared in a few minutes.

Then Ammonoff, with all his strength, threw the bottle out of the window.

He saw it flash in the sun and fall on the granite flags near the fountain.

Instantly their doubts were solved.

There was a broad blaze of white flame, a sharp, ear-splitting crash, and a puff of thin white smoke, which cleared away almost instantly, revealing a pit in the ground several feet deep, while fragments of stone, broken up as fine as sand, were showered all over the court.

General Milutine was as white as a sheet.

"Heavens! suppose I had opened it," he said.

Ammonoff laughed dryly.

"We should have needed a new minister of war, general," he said. "But observe, I pray you, the effects of nitro-glycerine. You see it does not spread far. It is about ten times as strong as gunpowder, but a shell would have sent pieces flying into the walls, and that has harmed nothing but a single paving-stone. Shall we send the rest into the Neva?"

"Anywhere to get rid of it," said Milutine, glancing nervously at the table. "Where can it be exploded with least damage?"

"I suggest," said the American, "tying each bottle to a float and firing at it in the river. A bullet will do the business."

"An excellent idea," said the general. "Will you carry the bottles?"

Ammonoff's answer was to take them up, and

they went across the court to the bank of the river, which was close by, followed by a curious group of officers.

Ammonoff noticed that the Russians were afraid to come near him, and he had to tie the bottles to floats himself, when he asked for a revolver and fired at both bottles as they floated down the river, fifty yards off.

At the third shot he hit one, and both exploded simultaneously, sending up white columns of spray into the air, but doing no further damage.

Then the American said to Milutine aloud, for the benefit of the officers:

"You see, general, there's very little danger in nitro-glycerine if it's properly handled. My compliments to the Nihilists and they don't amount to so much as I thought."

As he spoke, he glanced aside to mark the effect of his words, and noticed that two of the officers were scowling and whispering to each other, with wild looks at him.

Affecting not to notice them, he returned to General Milutine's cabinet, where the old minister said warmly:

"Count Ammonoff, I am under many obligations to you. Now I shall know what to do with that villain. It is a pity the old times are over."

"What old times, general?"

"Well, you may remember that, twenty years ago, we had no such things as Nihilists, because if a man was suspected of treason, we used to flog him till he told us all about it. Now it's different. The poor czar that is dead abolished flogging before sentence, so we have to try this fellow before a jury. It is a farce. But never mind that. You have something to ask me. What can I do for you?"

"I came for orders, general."

"I have none to give you except these. Go where you like; do what you please; but let me know weekly where you are."

CHAPTER VIII.

SOFIA IVANOWNA.

"But you don't mean to say," said Hammond, "that you have no instructions to give—"

"None," interrupted the general. "His majesty's orders are explicit. You are to do as you please, go where you please, so long as you report weekly to me where you are."

"But suppose I want to leave the country—"

"You are at liberty to do it. His majesty has told me that he is the only one to say a word to you. He has perfect confidence in your discretion."

"By 'reporting' what do you mean? Am I to give an account of what I have done during the week?"

"By no means. Indeed, his majesty told me to say that if you have any news he wishes you to give it to himself personally, by word of mouth, at Gatschina. Otherwise, you are unfettered."

"I have an invitation to go to the estate of the Princess Koulikoff, general. Do you think I had better go?"

The general shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not? Between you and me, my dear count, one has as much chance there as anywhere to root out these cursed Nihilists. For my part, I am not only disgusted, but disheartened. This dynamite business is very demoralizing. One can never tell when one's turn is coming. Suppose that man had thrown one of his bottles at me. On only one point I feel safe. The disaffection has not yet entered the army."

"Are you sure of that, general?"

"My God, yes!" said Milutine in a nervous way. "You don't surely suspect any one?"

Ammonoff reflected that his only suspicion was founded on a scowl, so he resolved to keep matters to himself till he was sure.

"None at all," he said, "only it would be awkward if you had secret Nihilists among your own officers, wouldn't it?"

Milutine shuddered.

"Awkward? It would be terrible."

"Well," said Ammonoff, reassuringly, "let it not weigh upon you. Probably the troops are all faithful. I shall go to Toulminka tomorrow. As you say, it is like hunting for a penny in the grass on a dark night. I may find out something by chance in one place as well as another."

He took his leave of the general and went back to the palace, to find a dainty perfumed note lying on his table at quarters.

It was sealed with green wax, and bore on the seal a prince's coronet and the Latin motto, "ACTA ME PROBANT." [Deeds prove me.]

The motto interested him.

"Deeds prove me? Yes, that is like the text, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' It is a good motto for a man, but this is evidently from a woman."

He opened the letter and read:

"MY DEAR COUNT:—I am inconsolable. Count Goryatchikoff tells me that you have some absurd scruples about doing in Russia as the Russians do, and positively I dread a month at Toulminka with nothing but these stupid *boyars*. You know what a *boyar* is of course. In the dictionary he is set down

as a Russian nobleman. Actually, he is a boor. I want to have one person in the house to whom I can talk and who will talk to me. Send me word at once that you will come with us to Toulminka. I can show you what you never saw in America, a hawking party on the steppe. I shall send my chasseur for an answer this afternoon at three, and remember that I can accept of no answer but one in the affirmative.

Yours in despair,

"NATALIE KOULIKOFF,
(nee ANKERSTROM.)"

Hammond looked at his watch and saw that it wanted ten minutes to the hour, so he sat down to write a reply, which he had just finished when he saw the gorgeous livery of the French chasseur by his open window, and the man came in, with a low bow, saying that he had the honor to present himself to monsieur by order of the gracious princess, to request an answer to her note.

Hammond looked at the chasseur with more attention than he had hitherto shown, revolving in his mind what had been said about him.

Certainly he was a handsome fellow, tall and well made, with brilliant black eyes, dark mustache and pointed beard, while his air was that of a prince.

"You have been long in the princess's service?" said Hammond.

The Frenchman drew himself up a little haughtily as he answered:

"Some time, monsieur. The answer, is it to be verbal?"

"Oh, no. In my country we answer ladies as they speak to us. Here is your letter. I am coming. What kind of a place is this Toulminka, and when do you start?"

"Toulminka is a village on the steppe, monsieur, and we take the train to go to Ekaterinebourg to-morrow morning at nine."

"Is it near a station?"

"Ten versts, monsieur."

Then the chasseur was going away, when Hammond pursued:

"Stop a moment. In my country we like to know people's names. What is yours?"

"Nothing, monsieur."

"How, nothing?"

"If monsieur desires me at any time, he has but to say 'Chasseur, here!' I am at the orders of madame and her guests, when in the house of madame."

Hammond smiled. He could hardly account to himself for the interest he had taken in the handsome chasseur, but pursued:

"And your duties? What are they? We have no chasseurs in America, you know."

The chasseur's black mustache curled in a certain derisive way.

"I have heard so, monsieur. We recognize Americans by the way they treat us. My duties are to do as I am told by madame, and to hold my tongue."

So saying, the inscrutable Frenchman wheeled round on his heel and left the room, while Hammond called in his servant and got ready for his departure.

That evening he was visited again by the gorgeous chasseur, who brought him another note from the princess, saying that she hoped he would meet her at the train ready to go with their party.

"Do not trouble about your horses," she wrote. "At Toulminka we always mount all of our guests on our own horses, which have a good name in Russia."

"Tell the princess I will be there," he said to the chasseur, and the man bowed low and left the room again.

Hammond could not help suspecting, from something in the chasseur's manner, that he had come on an unwelcome errand, and, ascribing it to the lack of that fee which foreigners are accustomed to give, he called him back and said hastily:

"Here, chasseur, I forgot something."

The handsome chasseur came back with a polite bow, and the same peculiar, half-scornful smile that Hammond had noticed on his face, saying:

"Monsieur has orders for me?"

"Not orders, but I forgot something. It is here, to drink my health, you know."

The chasseur took with the same smile the gold piece handed him by the young officer, and said quietly:

"Monsieur is learning our customs, I see. But in France we always leave it on the table, and turn our heads."

Hammond could not help laughing at the quiet, superior tone in which it was said.

"You must excuse me, chasseur," he replied, "for not having been born in Europe. I am learning your ways as fast as I can."

The chasseur bowed as politely as before.

"Monsieur will find a good deal to learn in Russia," he said with the same slight smile. "Americans generally find that."

Something in his manner nettled Hammond so that he retorted:

"For all that we can teach you a thing or two over the water."

The chasseur shrugged his shoulders and made no reply, but another bow.

As he went outside Hammond had the curiosity to watch him, and saw him stop and speak to a soldier, with whom he shook hands

before he vanished. The young aide-de-camp watched the soldier pass by the palace, and, as he came by the window, called out:

"Hoh! soldier, come in here!"

The man—a grenadier off duty—stared at the officer who called him in, but obeyed the summons, and stood bolt upright before Hammond who said:

"What is your name?"

"Martin Ivanitch, most high-born."

"You met a chasseur just now, Martin."

Martin stared and his face fell.

"Yes, most high-born."

"What did he say to you?"

Martin's face turned red as he replied evasively, with eyes cast down:

"Nothing of importance, most high-born."

"That is for me to judge. What did he say?"

"Asked a question, most high-born."

"What was it?"

"Whether I drank brandy, most high-born."

"And what said you?"

Martin looked uncomfortable.

"Told him we didn't often get the chance to do it, most high-born."

"And what did he say?"

Martin hesitated.

"Nothing of importance, I assure you, most high-born."

"What did he say?" asked Hammond sternly.

Martin looked more disturbed than ever as he replied:

"He asked me to drink a health to Sofia Ivanowna, most high-born, and gave me a gold piece."

Hammond was puzzled.

"Sofia Ivanowna? Who the deuce is she, Martin?"

Martin looked stolidly at the wall.

"I'm sure I don't know, most high-born."

Hammond knew he was lying, but he also knew, from the stupid air of the soldier, that he could not be coaxed into saying anything more.

"Let me see the gold piece," he said.

Unwillingly Martin produced the identical gold piece Hammond had given to the chasseur, and Hammond continued:

"Look here, Martin, that piece is mine. I'll give you another beside it if you'll tell me who Sofia Ivanowna is."

Martin looked at the wall.

"I don't know, most high-born."

"Very well, Martin, then you'll not be able to drink her health," said Hammond, calmly, "and you'll be in the guard-house in another five minutes if you don't tell the truth. Did you ever run down the green street?"

Martin turned pale and shuddered. To a Russian the words "running down the green street" mean running the gantlet of a regiment armed with sticks.

Still Martin repeated mechanically:

"I don't know, most high-born one."

"Go to your barracks then," said Hammond, tossing him the gold piece. "I was only trying you. Here's another to drink the health of your gracious czar. You don't object to that, Martin?"

Martin looked greatly relieved as he answered in a low tone:

"I beg your honorable pardon. I did not know you were one of us. I will do it with pleasure. Long live Sofia Ivanowna and the czar. Russia will be happy when they are one."

Then he departed and left Hammond in a state of puzzlement that he could not hide from himself.

Who was Sofia Ivanowna?

He recalled the names of all the Russian princesses, but not a Sofia was among them, and Ivan was an old fashioned Russian name, not heard in the imperial family since the days before Peter the Great, whose mother was—

"Sofia of course," he ejaculated aloud. "Yes, and her father was Ivan. That must be it. But what the deuce does it all mean?"

That evening he went, for the first time since his commission, to the public mess of the officers on the household staff, and was received with much apparent cordiality, though he could see that there was a good deal of jealousy among his juniors at his sudden exaltation. His friend Goryautchikoff was telling every one in high glee how he had secured a leave and was going to Toulminka, and what a pleasant visit he expected to have, when Ammonoff suddenly said:

"Ah, by the by, did any of you gentlemen ever hear of Sofia Ivanowna?"

Had a shell dropped in the room the consternation could not have been greater than that produced by these simple words.

Goryautchikoff started up, staring at him as if he had been a specter, while an old gray-headed general turned purple in the face and blurted out:

"Sofia Ivanowna be hanged! What do you mean by bringing up her name in this palace? Are you also a Nihilist?"

Ammonoff was amazed.

"Upon my word, no; but I heard the name to-day for the first time, and I wondered who she could be."

The old general scowled at him.

"When you've lived here a little longer,

you'll not be so innocent. That's the name that stands at the foot of the Nihilist documents as their queen."

"Then what does it mean when a man drinks a health to Sofia Ivanowna?" asked Ammonoff, his heart beginning to beat a little faster as he looked round the room and saw that more than half the guests looked anxious and frightened, while the rest, including the old general, were furious.

The red-faced general scowled again.

"If I caught any officer in my command doing such a thing, I'd clap him in arrest, with a sentry over him in a minute."

"And suppose a private soldier did it?" said Ammonoff, curiously.

"I'd give him a little run down the green street, as the men call it, to teach him that republican doctrines don't go well with Russia," retorted the general. "Have you seen or heard anything of the sort, Count Ammonoff?"

Ammonoff yawned slightly, watching, under his eyes, the effect of the conversation on the other officers. A flood of light was beginning to pour in on him as to Nihilism.

"No," he said indifferently. "I saw a little riot in the street to-day, and the Cossacks were flogging a lot of peasants; that was all. I asked one of them what it was for and he said for drinking to Sofia Ivanowna."

"And served them right," said the general irascibly. "If I had my way I'd shoot a few instead of flogging. These Nihilists thrive on mercy. In the good old days of Czar Nicholas we had plenty of whip and very little revolution, and now it is all the other way."

From that moment the conversation at the table languished, and it seemed as if every man was watching his neighbor to find out what he was thinking about.

Ammonoff, much interested and excited at the clue that had thus accidentally fallen into his hands, was the only one of the party who retained his calmness and was able to watch the others and conceal his feelings while watching them.

"Sofia Ivanowna" meant Nihilism; a health to her meant success to Nihilism; Princess Koulikoff's chasseur had given a grenadier a gold piece to do a treasonable act, and the soldier had dropped the secret unintentionally.

Was the princess also a Nihilist? That remained to be seen. At all events, his visit would serve to test the truth of a good many things he began to suspect.

General Milutine was right. He was as likely to find out about Nihilism at Toulminka as anywhere else. Already he had proved to his own mind that Goryautchikoff and half the officers at the table were somehow secretly connected with the order.

He had noticed how frightened they all looked at the mention of Sofia Ivanowna and how relieved they seemed to be at his explanation about the street riot.

Goryautchikoff in particular was apparently very happy over the termination of the questioning, for he began to drink champagne at a great rate, with ostentatious toasts to the czar, the zarina, and every member of the royal family in succession, till he got pretty drunk and had to be taken home.

When morning came Ammonoff had himself and all his belongings driven to the station, where he saw a large brilliant party waiting on the platform and was at once greeted by the Princess Koulikoff with:

"So, my dear count, you have come at last, and we are all glad. Here is Goryautchikoff with a pale face and a headache, and Prince Doratoff and the Baroness Boulkin, and we're all ready to go. In twelve hours we shall be out on the free steppe and forget that civilization exists. Come, let us all be nomads and savages."

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE STEPPE.

OUT at the foot of the Ural Mountains toward the Caspian Sea lies part of the great gently-sloping plain, that stretches from the wall of China to the Holland marshes in one unbroken sheet of green.

For fourteen hundred years it has been roamed by Tartar and Turkoman, Bashkir and Kirghis; coming on the down grade to devastate Europe.

Attila and his Huns swept over it to the conquest of the Russian Empire, and Jenghis Khan and his successors rode down the same slope to overrun Russia, eight hundred years after Attila.

To-day it remains the same as it was a thousand years ago, and the same people roam over it, substantially unchanged.

The old nomads carried swords and bows; so do many of their successors to day, firearms being almost unknown on the steppe.

Now, as of yore, the whole of this vast plain is covered with a network of almost invisible tracks over which tribes drive their flocks from pasture to pasture at stated times, none encroaching on the dominion of another, save at the cost of a bloody feud; immemorial custom being stronger than law.

In the midst of this plain come the Russian dominions, where civilization intrudes itself on barbarism, where the Bashkir Tartars are visited at regular intervals by police officers and Cossacks, and where the villages of great lords alternate with the shifting *auls* or camps of wandering herdsmen.

One of these villages was Toulminka, on the gentle swells at the foot of the Ural mountains, where they merge in the plains. The blue lines of rounded hills far to the north were all the reminder of the existence of the chain, while the river Ural went winding along between green meadows, to lose itself in the far-away Caspian.

Toulminka itself consisted of a large, but low and straggling castle or fortified post, built in the middle ages to repel wandering Tartars, around which one might see a number of little heaps of dirt, looking like mole-hills, which marked the burrows in which the "free and happy peasantry" of Toulminka passed the winter months, to economize fuel and labor.

These dwellings of poverty were mere cellars, roofed over with a few sticks and a central pole, the whole covered with thick thatch.

In the summer time they were unbearable from the abundance of vermin, unless made over perfectly new; so it was the custom of the simple inhabitants to remove their belongings to the open air, take out the framework of sticks, and make a bonfire of the thatch in the cellar, which was then left open till the approach of autumn, when it was rethatched with dried grass.

During the summer, the villagers erected sheds of thatch, as cooler than the cellars, but the first swoop of the northeast wind in November sent them to their burrows, to huddle together like sheep.

The yearly range of the thermometer in Toulminka, was from eighty-five degrees above zero in July to forty below at New Year, and the peasants wore their sheepskin coats with the wool inside, half the year, wool outside, the other, if not rich enough to possess a shirt and *sharovory* or big breeches of velvet for hot weather.

Eight miles away, over the steppe, one might see the occasional smoke of a passing locomotive going toward Oranburg, but when that had passed, the steppe was as solitary as ever, save for the sheep and a few camels and herdsmen dotting the grassy sea.

Into the midst of this peaceful pastoral scene the day after leaving St. Petersburg, came the gay caravan of the Princess Koulikoff, with the Yankee Cossack Hammond, or Ammonoff, among them.

They came from the station of the railroad, most of them on horseback, a few riding with the baggage in *telegas*.

If you never saw a *telega*, imagine a cab or old-fashioned hooded "one-horse shay," taken off our light American wheels, and put on four cart wheels on a pair of long, springy poles.

That is a *telega*, capable of going over any sort of road, or no road; easily repaired, and as comfortable to ride in as a coal-cart.

The horses were little scrubby beasts that looked as if they were not worth ten dollars apiece, but they galloped the whole distance from the station to Toulminka without a sign of fatigue, in an hour.

The castle of the Koulikoffs covered more than four acres of ground, with its courts, stables and granaries, and the main house, where the guests lodged, was furnished with a richness and luxury that fairly astonished Ammonoff in such a place.

Gold and silver plate, malachite tables, quaint ornaments in which money seemed to have been lavished for the sake of being extravagant, abounded everywhere.

On a malachite mantle, set with nuggets of virgin gold, Hammond saw one instance of barbaric taste that struck him as particularly Russian.

An ostrich egg had been taken as the base of the ornament, and made to do duty as the body of a small ostrich, the neck, legs and wings made of pure gold, studded with jewels so costly that he said to the princess:

"That must be a costly toy. Did you have it made?"

The princess curled her red lip.

"I, indeed? No, that was a whim of the poor general. You see the reason I asked you to come here now. These Russians are all Tartars at heart. To think of all that being thrown away on what, after all, is only a blown egg-shell!"

Ammonoff found a suite of gorgeous apartments assigned to him, and the castle soon resounded with voices, as the gay guests wandered to and fro.

Goryautchikoff stuck close to the princess, with the result of being snubbed more than any man in the company, while Hammond, who kept aloof, was honored by more than one summons during the day to the side of the mistress of the mansion. But during the journey to Toulminka, and since their arrival, though he had kept his wits on the alert, he had discovered no symptoms of Nihilism more dangerous than sneers at the czar for shutting himself up in

Gatschina, and no allusion was made to the mystic Sofia Ivanowna.

But Hammond was a Yankee and had learned self-control in his career as a newspaper man; therefore he expected little.

He attended to his own affairs, pretended to be absorbed in everything Russian he saw, and was charmed when the princess told him that the promised hawking-party would take place the very next day.

"I have sent word to my people to drive all the game near the castle," she said.

"It is scattered over the steppe, but we will enjoy it beneath our walls. How many men do you suppose I have sent?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Fifty?"

"Fifty indeed! The prince had three thousand serfs on the estate in the old times, and since the emancipation they have increased. No, there are fifteen hundred men going out tonight to beat a great circle."

"Fifteen hundred men? You have not so many in that village, surely?"

"Oh, no, but that is not my only village and I have Bashkirs besides. You will see them in the morning. Quite a regiment."

And when the morning came there was a great tooting of cow horns out on the steppe; and Hammond looking from his window, saw a skirmish line of men more than a mile long coming toward the castle in the arc of a circle, while all the steppe before them was full of fluttering birds, leaping hares and antelopes, wild with terror at the noise behind them.

The castle guests hurried out to find horses waiting for them; the princess, in a charming blue riding habit, with a hawk on her wrist, ready to start; and she beckoned to Hammond to ride by her as they all dashed forward at a gallop.

For some little time the Yankee Cossack was too much taken up with the novelty and excitement of the sport to do anything but enjoy it like the rest by galloping and shouting, as the beaters withdrew to either side and the hawks were thrown off and went towering up in the air, as if puzzled at the quantity of game before them.

Then, before he knew what had happened, he found himself almost alone on the steppe, watching the contest going on in the sky before him, between a hawk and a bustard, the latter bird twice as large as a turkey, while the hawk did not weigh ten pounds.

They were trying to mount above each other, the hawk in circles, the bustard going straight up, the wind carrying them on so fast that Hammond had to gallop his best to keep up, till the shouting faded away in the distance, and the only sound heard in the silence of the steppe was the scream of the hawk as he finally gained his point of vantage and swooped down on the bustard in mid-air.

A moment later, the two birds fell through the air like stones, and Hammond saw that the talons of the hawk were buried in the bustard's head as they came.

"Well done, Vassili!" cried an eager voice behind him, and Hammond looked round to see his hostess, all alone, coming on at full gallop on a bay horse.

"Catch him quick before he gorges and is off," cried the lady. "Vassili is a good bird, but wild."

Thus urged, Ammonoff galloped up to the birds, found the hawk already trying to split the bustard's skull with his strong beak to feast on the brains, before he flew away.

The young officer was quite green at the business, for he had never hooded a hawk in his life, but being a Yankee, he was full of resource, and as he came up he took off his tall fur cap, with which he covered up the hawk so neatly and quickly that the princess clapped her hands, crying:

"Well done, my American friend; but don't hurt Vassili. If he breaks a wing-feather, the falconer will call you a fool. See—take him by the shanks, and I'll hood him as you take off the hat. Be careful. His talons are like needles. That's it!"

And with a practiced skill that showed her to be an old mistress of the gentle art of falconry, the princess hooded Vassili and restored him to her wrist, observing:

"That was a good chase. How far, think you, has it led us, count?"

Ammonoff looked round him amazedly. It seemed as if he could not have ridden a mile; but the castle was out of sight; so were the flocks and herds, and all around them was a vast, unbroken field of green grass.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we have come further than I thought. Do you know this country well, princess?"

"I ought to do so, count. Well, we are nearer ten than five miles from the castle, and we have dropped those tiresome Russians. It is well, for I want to speak to you."

"To me, madame?"

He began to draw in his horns already, though madame was a bewitching person.

But Hargreave Hammond (Count Ammonoff) was not a common man, and he had not yet fallen in love with the princess.

Madame Koulikoff pointed to the dead bustard, saying:

"Put it behind your saddle. Do you think it justifiable to kill even a bird to secure a moment's conversation with a person?"

"It depends on the person, madame. I do not regret the bird's death in the least, since it has gained me this interview."

He spoke in his most gallant way, and the lady smiled as she answered:

"A truce to compliments. I hear them all the time. I wish to talk seriously."

"I am gravity and gloom personified. But you cannot object to my looking the things you forbid me to say."

And he favored her with a languishing glance which had its effect; for he was a very handsome young fellow, and an idea had come into his head he was not slow to improve.

She turned away her head to repress a smile, and said, as severely as she could:

"I tell you not to be nonsensical. You are too sensible to talk sentiment like a Russian. I have something to say to you."

"What is it?" he asked, dropping his banter, for he saw she was in earnest.

"What did you mean the other night in asking before General Dobrasoff, what it meant to drink health to Sofia Ivanowna?"

"Simply that I wanted to know, princess."

"And how did you hear of Sofia Ivanowna?"

"Has not Goryautchikoff told you? He was present and heard why."

"Goryautchikoff heard no such thing. He only heard what you said was the reason."

"And what was that?"

"An invention. You said that a man was flogged by a Cossack for drinking a health to Sofia Ivanowna, and that you were told so that day. Now, I know well that no such thing occurred. Tell me truly what made you ask the question?"

"Well, princess, if you know what I said, you surely do not expect me to admit that I told what was not true?" said Hammond, with a slight smile, which seemed to cause her some irritation for she answered:

"You are evading my question. You were not asked to speak the truth before old Dobrasoff, who is known to be an inveterate tyrant-lover. I ask you now, what was it caused you to ask the question, and where did you first hear of Sofia Ivanowna?"

Thus urged, Hammond, who had gained time to think, replied:

"I heard the name from a soldier who told me he had been offered a twenty-ruble piece to drink her health."

"Then why did you not ask him, instead of blurring it out before Dobrasoff?"

"I did ask him, and he told me he did not know."

The princess bit her lip.

"You are an exasperating man. I thought you were a republican in principle."

"So I am, madame."

"Then why— But stay. Who gave the man the money?"

"Your own chasseur, princess," said the officer gravely. "I gave him the piece and saw him stop and speak to the soldier, whom I questioned afterward."

The princess made a pettish motion and said, half to herself:

"These men are so silly."

She did not seem to be alarmed at the revelation at all, for she went on:

"A jest, I suppose. Achilles is a curious fellow, above his station."

"It is a jest that would compromise his mistress if repeated too often," said Hammond. "I don't suppose you are mad enough to be connected with these fanatical Nihilists, but if I were you, I would dismiss a man that does things of that sort. If it had been brought to old Dobrasoff's notice, it would have proved an awkward responsibility for even you, madame."

The princess tossed her head and gave him a saucy look of her blue eyes.

"But it did not come to his notice. No one knows of it but you, and you are an American and a republican. It is not your interest to give people to torture and death, simply because they do not believe in absolute despotism. Is it?"

"No," he answered, slowly; "if, as I presume, you mean to say that you really believe in the Nihilists—"

"I said no such thing," she interrupted hastily.

"I said only that I did not believe in absolute despotism. I am a Swede."

"Well, no matter, princess. I do not seek to pry into your opinions. Assassination I abhor, and will prevent if I can, but I do not propose to betray my charming hostess because she has an indiscreet servant."

The princess looked at him with a singular expression, as she replied:

"Do you know, you are made to be one of us, Count Ammonoff? But you could not betray me or any of us. The Nihilists have more power than you are aware of."

CHAPTER X.

THE TARTAR CAMP.

"The Nihilists have more power than you are aware of."

The words struck him, from the meaning way

in which they were spoken, and the Yankee Cossack said doubtfully:

"Possibly they may. If I am not mistaken, this meeting at your house is a Nihilist gathering."

The princess laughed.

"If it comes to that, three-quarters of Russia believes as we do. We may not be active in the order, but we feel that the time has come for a change, and we respect these men that are ready to throw away their lives that the people may be free."

"Do you mean the assassins who throw bombs in crowded streets?" asked he.

She threw up her head.

"I mean the executioners of the tyrant. You have nothing to say against a man who deliberately kills another, bound and helpless. You call him a minister of justice. But when our ministers of justice execute the mandates of Sofia Ivanowna and kill their man in spite of all his guards and officers in sight of all the people, then you cry out 'assassin,' and pretend to be shocked. Oh, you Americans are a consistent people!"

She spoke with warmth and bitterness, and Hammond could not help admiring her. She looked very beautiful in her trim blue habit, on a splendid bay horse, which she rode gracefully, and her blue eyes had a touch of scorn in them as she spoke and looked at him.

"An American the servant and spy of a tyrant!" she pursued, still more bitterly. "Oh, it is a lofty task you have undertaken, monsieur! To save the life and crown of a big lolling fellow, calling himself a soldier, but shutting himself up in Gatschina and afraid to stir from the protection of his guards. That is the czar you expect us to adore as the minister of God; to call him 'Our Father Czar,' when he is the laughing-stock of Europe for his cowardice."

Hammond stared. He had never heard any one in Russia speak out in such a way before that day.

"Are you aware, princess," he said, "that you are talking imprudently? I am aide-de-camp to his majesty, and I may report what you say about him."

She laughed, and pointed her whip round her over the bare steppe.

"Are you aware, Count Ammonoff, that I am absolute mistress here, and that, therefore, it is you who are talking imprudently? I have but to denounce you as a spy, and you would never leave Toulminka."

Hammond started slightly. This beautiful lady was openly threatening him.

"You forget one thing, however, princess," he observed quietly.

"And what is that?"

"That we are alone on the steppe, and that forewarned is forearmed."

Now she turned on him haughtily.

"What do you mean, sir? That you would offer me violence?"

"Oh, no, madame; very far from that. But what is to hinder me from riding away to the station and telegraphing to St. Petersburg that I have found a nest of Nihilists?"

The princess looked at him for a moment and then shifted her mood with the caprice of a fine lady, crying:

"Well, I declare, if the man does not think we are in the middle ages, I believe. My dear count, I know you'll do no such thing."

"And why not, madame?"

"Because you are a civilized gentleman and my guest. I am not afraid you will send me to Siberia. You are not a Russian."

"Thank you, princess. In truth, however, I am more than half in earnest. I have a duty to perform to his majesty, which must be done or I must resign my place."

"There is no need of that," said she quickly.

"In truth you are too scrupulous altogether. Do you not know that more than half the officers of the Imperial Guard are at heart revolutionists, though they may not be active Nihilists?"

"I suspected as much, madame."

"Then why do you persist in clinging to this feeble creature they call a czar, who dare not quit the walls of his palace for fear of execution by his own people?"

"Because, madame, I am an American, and I love fair play. You do not give the new czar fair play."

"I? What have I to do with it? I have not said that I am a Nihilist."

"You have not, but you have admitted that you sympathize with them."

"I sympathize with the law of justice. I reverence the men who died to punish the Russian tyrant."

"But what had he done to them? It seemed to me to be a monstrous assassination of a man who had never harmed a soul."

The lady laughed scornfully.

"Count Ammonoff, you are too innocent for belief. Alexander II. never harmed a soul, did he not? How many men has he sent to Siberia or ordered to be shot within the last year? You do not know, perhaps, that more than a thousand lives were wasted to keep him on the throne."

"But they were rebels, criminals."

"And he, what was he? The murderer of the people. He died a just death, if ever a man was justly punished."

Hammond compressed his lips. He did not know what to say or do with a woman who was his hostess and talked this way. Moreover, they were all alone on the green steppe, and he could not be rude.

So he said quietly:

"Don't you think we should do well to drop a subject on which we cannot agree? I am honored by your confidence. I will not betray you. But I think it is hardly fair to abuse his majesty to his personal aide-de-camp."

The princess flushed a little, but answered lightly with a pout:

"I am a woman, and claim a woman's privilege to speak my mind. You, as an American, don't object to free speech."

"Certainly not. I only object to deeds."

"And I have committed none yet, so you must let me talk."

"As you please, madame. Is that the castle I see yonder?"

They had been riding aimlessly over the steppe, and he saw before them a gentle swell like a wave of the sea, on the other side of which some sheep and camels were feeding near the summit, with what looked like buildings behind them, or the roofs of buildings.

The princess looked a moment and then uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, count!" she said, "do you know I have mistaken the way? Yonder is the camp of Nazar Beg."

"And who, may I ask, is Nazar Beg?"

"A Tartar chief, one of my tenants, a most hospitable person. Upon my word, I fear that—"

She stopped and colored slightly.

"You fear what, madame?"

She gave a little uneasy laugh.

"That we shall not get back to the castle of Toulminka to-night, count, that's all."

Hammond smiled, as if pleased.

"That supposition is more terrible to you than to me, princess. Will Mr. Nazar treat us politely?"

"Politely? He will be ready to fall down and worship us both."

"Then I don't see why we should not take things as they come, princess. I never saw a Tartar camp before, and I should like to see one now."

"I'm not thinking of that," answered the lady rather sharply. "I'm thinking of what the people at the castle will say when they miss us."

Hammond, in his pre-occupation, had not thought of this, and as it flashed over his mind that the tongue of scandal might be busy with his fair hostess's name, he checked his horse and said:

"On second thoughts, madame, you must go on to the camp alone. I have not seen you all day, remember. Probably half of your guests are scattered over the steppe, and many have lost their way."

She looked at him as if she did not clearly understand.

"But I could not allow you to go off alone. You do not know the way."

"I am a man and can take care of myself, princess. You are a lady whose reputation may be compromised. I shall ride on alone. Hark! We are not far from the railroad. There is the whistle now."

It seemed strange to hear the shriek of the locomotive in the silent steppe, but they could distinguish it faintly.

"That is at the Grodsky station," said the princess, listening. "Do you know, count, we have come further than I thought. Miles vanish quickly when one gallops after wings."

Hammond looked at the swell ahead and then out to the northwest where the smoke of the distant locomotive hung like a white speck of cloud. Then he took his resolution.

"The camp is still several miles off," he said, "but I suppose Tartar eyes are sharp. I will place the bastard behind your saddle. Your bird killed it. I will ride toward the smoke and follow the track to Toulminka. I suppose your tenant, Mr. Nazar, knows enough to send a messenger to the castle."

The princess seemed to be thoughtful while he was speaking.

"Yes," she answered absently.

"Then farewell, madame," he answered, lifting his hat. "We have not met to-day. I got lost one way and you another."

He was riding away when she called:

"Count Ammonoff."

"Madame?"

She seemed to be embarrassed.

"I fear I am putting you to a great deal of trouble," she said in a low tone.

"Madame, I am on duty," was all he answered, and then he rode steadily away, taking the direction of the railroad.

The last that he saw of the princess she was galloping toward the Tartar aoul, which he could now see was a collection of gray, bee-hive shaped, felt tents, in the midst of herds of

horses, camels and sheep. Several horsemen were coming out to meet her and the camp seemed to be in an uproar, as if they had recognized their princess. He sighed slightly, for it was a pleasant picture; then set spurs to his horse and galloped steadily on for nearly an hour, till he came to the iron road that stretched out over the plain, without so much as a solitary track-walker in sight.

But he was no longer lost. The track was a point of departure and he rode along it for a couple of hours more, till he was reminded by the complaining of his internal organs, that he had come out without breakfast and that it was past ten o'clock.

There was plenty of game on the steppe, but he had come out unarmed, in plain clothes, and he could not shoot a bustard or quail, though they rose up almost under his horse's feet, for he had not so much as a pistol.

At last, as he began to wax faint and famished, he caught sight of the quaint little station of Toulminka, with the keeper's cottage near it, and rode up to find the keeper at the door, bowing and looking much surprised at the apparition of a solitary horseman.

"Your nobility is welcome, most high-born," he said, "but you are too late for the train. It had passed an hour and a half ago."

"I know it," replied Ammonoff. "I don't want any train. I've lost my way in a hawk-ping-party, and I'm hungry. What have you to eat that this will pay for?"

He tossed the keeper a silver rouble and the man's eyes glistened. It was a month's pay to him.

"It is but little I can offer your nobility except *sheechee* and black bread—" he began.

"What's *sheechee*?" asked Hammond.

"Cabbage soup, most high-born. I have some on the fire now. And we have a cheese and some fowls, if your nobility would condescend to wait till one is cooked."

Hammond swung himself off his horse.

"Give my beast some barley or oats," he said, "and kill a chicken as soon as you can. Pull the skin off, cut it up and boil it. I've no time to wait. I must get to Toulminka before lunch, if I can. I'll give you another rouble if you're ready in ten minutes."

The station-keeper called his wife, a stout, Tartar-looking woman, and the two bustled about to such purpose that the Yankee Cossack was soon served enough to eat, and then, his hunger abated, he began to talk.

"What's your name, friend?"

"Mitri Dimitrovitch, most high-born, and this is my wife, Akoulina."

"You are a tenant of the princess?"

"Of the gracious Princess Natalie Koulikoff. Yes, most high-born."

"Does your office here, pay you?"

"Pretty well, most high-born. Akoulina and I don't complain."

"And you love the czar?"

"Yes, most high-born."

But the answer was cold and constrained and Ammonoff continued:

"Did you ever hear of Sofia Ivanowna?"

Instantly the station-keeper's face took on the appearance of a stone mask.

"Never, most high-born."

Ammonoff smiled.

"You need not try to deceive me. I am one of your kind, Mitri."

A foxy gleam came into Mitri's eyes.

"I've no doubt if your nobility says so. Your nobility can tell what time it is?"

Hammond pulled out his watch, puzzled by the question.

"Certainly; it is five minutes past eleven. Have you no clock here?"

The station-master smiled.

"Yes, most high-born, but it does not keep the same time as yours."

Then he relapsed into the same stolid look Hammond had noticed on the face of the grenadier Martin, and the young officer knowing from experience that it was of no use to attempt further questions, called for his horse, paid his rouble and rode away toward Toulminka.

As he departed, Mitri Dimitrovitch said to his wife, Akoulina:

"There goes one of the leeches."

Akoulina spat after Ammonoff viciously.

"And he pretended to be one of us."

Mitri laughed.

"Did you see him pull out his watch, when I tested him for the word?"

Akoulina laughed scornfully.

"And they think to suck our blood and get our secrets, these officers! Do you know, Mitri, I wish the queen would send me to St. Petersburg. I can throw a bomb as well as any one."

"Patience," returned Mitri. "Our time will come, Akoulina."

CHAPTER IX.

THE ALARM.

AMMONOFF rode into the castle court to find the whole place in a turmoil, Goryautchikoff swearing, the guests looking anxious, and every one inquiring of every one else what had become of the princess.

"Have you seen her?" asked Goryautchikoff. "Where have you been? You were with her?"

He looked pale and angry as he spoke, and Ammonoff saw that he was jealous.

"I lost my way following a hawk," the young officer explained, "and rode home by the railroad track. I saw no one on the road, but the station-master and his wife."

Goryautchikoff looked more anxious than before as he muttered:

"It is impossible she can have lost her way, too, on her own estates. We must send out couriers. Strange, that you didn't see her."

"Why, who's lost?" asked Hammond, with his most innocent look.

"The princess," returned his friend. "My God! if harm comes to her, what are we going to do? You don't know what depends on her life. We must be off at once."

"Certainly," replied Hammond. "Let us go at once. Which way will you look?"

"To the east of course," said Goryautchikoff. "The hunt went that way. And the Tartars are there, and one knows—"

"What Tartars?" interrupted Hammond. "I thought they were all her tenants, for miles."

Goryautchikoff sneered bitterly.

"Tenants? Yes. After a fashion. Here for a week, next week away toward the Caspian. She has three thousand such tenants, who divide their favors between her and Count Strogovitch. These tribes roam over the plains, and each has its station for every week in the year."

"But who can keep them in control? Suppose they took a fancy to hold her for ransom, and carry her off to the Kirghis steppes, out of the Russian dominions? Who is going to catch them?"

"I, for one," said Ammonoff quietly. "If the princess came to harm, I would fetch her back at any price."

"I fear she has come to harm," said his friend gloomily. "She ought to have been back by this time."

Hammond began to feel alarmed himself.

Could it be possible Nazar Beg, in whom the princess had expressed such confidence, had turned traitor, and that Natalie was exposed to danger through him?

He looked at his watch. It was nearly twelve o'clock now, and it must have been about half-past nine when he left the princess, being welcomed in the Bashkir camp.

He knew, from the long circuit he himself had taken, that it could not be more than an hour's riding in a straight line to Nazar Beg's camp, and the only thing that puzzled him was how to conceal the fact that he and the princess had been alone together on the steppe.

"What camps are there near here?" he asked.

Goryautchikoff groaned.

"I have been questioning the steward, and he says that Nazar Beg's aoul is the only one, and that Nazar is in trouble."

Hammond started.

"In trouble! What trouble?"

"With the Tartar police. He has had a quarrel with the Sultan Veizak, about a pool where both watered camels, and the two bands are going to fight."

Now, indeed, Hammond began to feel uneasy.

"Is this Sultan Veizak also a tenant of the princess?" he asked. "If he is, her authority may stop the fighting."

Goryautchikoff shook his head.

"No. He's one of Strogovitch's tenants. The count had a grant next to Prince Koulikoff's, out toward the Sea of Aral, and he hates the princess like poison."

"Why?"

"Because she refused to marry him, after old Koulikoff's death. He thought to bring the two grants together, and become the richest man in Russia."

"Don't be too uneasy," remarked Hammond consolingly. "It is very possible that the princess may have fallen in with Nazar Beg, and that he has detained her from purely hospitable motives, or to curry favor with his landlady."

"Possibly so," returned Goryautchikoff, with the same uneasy look; "but I'm going to find her at any hazard. Here come the men now."

It struck Hammond that the other chief was somewhat unduly anxious about his hostess, and puzzled him as to what could be the reason, till he saw the party that had been made up to follow the princess.

It consisted entirely of gentlemen of rank, most of them army officers, with no servants among them, and they were all armed to the teeth with revolvers, in a style common enough in America, on the plains, but very rare in Russia on the steppes.

He said nothing as he watched them depart, but went up to his own room, armed himself in the same style, put on a simple undress uniform, put in his pocket the official authority he had received from the czar, and then sat down and wrote a short letter to General Milutine.

"GENERAL:—I am about to leave Toulminka to go for a journey on the steppes after the Princess Koulikoff. She is with a certain Nazar Beg, a Tartar, who has quarreled with Sultan Veizak, another

Tartar. If you do not hear from me for three days, please telegraph to all the officers of troops between the Ural river and Khiva to hunt for us.

"AMMONOFF."

This letter written, he went out and called for his own servant—a young Cossack of the guard called Sirotkin—and told him:

"Take this letter to the station, wait for the train, give it to the guard to deliver in St. Petersburg, and then come back and follow me. Do you understand?"

Sirotkin saluted.

"Yes, most high-born."

"And you don't even want to know where I'm going, Sirotkin?"

"I'll find that out afterward, most high-born."

Ammonoff smiled. It was a fair specimen of the unreasoning docility of a Cossack on duty.

"Well, Sirotkin, I won't give you that trouble. I'm going to strike out into the steppe to the southeast, in the direction of the Sea of Aral. You know where that is?"

Sirotkin brightened up. He was a native of the district of Orenburg.

"I know every foot of the country to Khiva, most high-born. I drove camels as a child on the route."

"Is there any place on the way where we can make a meeting, Sirotkin?"

Sirotkin considered a moment, and pointed out of the window of the castle toward the southeast.

"Does your nobility observe there a small dip in the horizon, like a notch bitten out of a piece of cheese?"

Hammond smiled at the simile.

"I see the least noticeable depression."

"That is called the 'Rat-bite,' most high-born. My mother told me that the steppe was all a great cheese once, and that a rat from the city of Khiva bit out that piece. It is shaped just as if a rat had gnawed it, and in the bottom is a pool of water. If your nobility will stop there, I will be back from the station at sunset."

"That will do, Sirotkin. Now tell me, are you afraid to go out on the steppe alone with me, for a month perhaps?"

Sirotkin showed his teeth in a smile of perfect delight.

"I was born on the steppe, most high-born, and I will take your nobility as far as the Turkomans, if you wish."

"Very well, Sirotkin. I'm going alone, and no one is to know it. When you come back, take a spare horse and my baggage—only what we shall want, you know—and follow me to the Rat-bite. Take these American arms. They are better than your own."

Sirotkin's eyes glistened as he examined the revolvers handed him by his master, and he put them in his belt with great satisfaction.

Then Hammond saw him set off for the station, and went down to the stable to prepare for his own departure.

He found the castle almost deserted of guests, with the exception of the Baroness Boulkin, a dark, French-looking lady, who was said to be a Spiritualist, but whom he suspected to be simply an intriguer.

The baroness saw him crossing the court to the stable, and called to him:

"Monsieur le Comte, come here, please."

When he was near he saw that she looked very much worried.

"They have all gone," she said, in a low tone. "Tell me, do you really think there is any danger for Natalie?"

"As a matter of fact, no, madame. She is among her own followers, and no one would dare to hurt her."

The baroness bent closer to him.

"But suppose they do dare to hurt her?"

"I don't care to suppose it, baroness. If it does happen, I, for one, will see that she is avenged fully."

The baroness shuddered.

"That will not comfort us. Oh, how I wish she had not gone out on this party, or that we had kept closer to her. You don't know how much depends on her life. We feel like a ship without a rudder, now she is gone."

"And who are we, madame?"

She made a dreary gesture as if in despair.

"You need not ask. I have heard all about you. You are our foe and a spy. Very well, you can have your way now. But mark my words. Our chief may be carried off to Siberia, but your czar will rue the day, Colonel Count Ammonoff!"

Ammonoff looked at her surprisedly.

"What do you mean? What have the czar or I to do with it?"

The baroness tossed her head.

"I say nothing; but I know I thought Natalie a great fool to invite you here. Instead of a convert you are only a spy!"

Ammonoff made no retort, but walked off toward the stables, thinking:

"This woman is crazy!"

He found the stable nearly emptied of the best horses, but from what remained selected a black Kirghis, with a bushy main and large gentle eyes.

The horse was scrubby and unkempt as to its hide, but it had a good head, and he knew that it came from a race full of endurance and vigor.

He saddled it himself, took a bag of oats behind the saddle, and filled a haversack with cold meat and bread, for which he raided the kitchen, roubles in hand, and finally rode out of the castle gate at one o'clock, heading straight for the little notch in the horizon, known as the "Rat-bite."

He had no very clear programme in his head as to what he was going to do, except that he was, somehow, going to find the princess, and rescue her if she was in trouble or danger.

He did not understand what made the rest of the male guests so anxious about the departure of the princess, and wondered why they had not invited him to go along with them in their quest. He had noticed that ever since he came back alone to the castle, no one had addressed him but the servants, the Baroness Boulkin and Goryautchikoff.

As Goryautchikoff and his friends set off, he had counted them. They were nine in number, all officers or nobles, all heavily armed, and without a servant in the party.

Why did they not take any servants? Why were they so anxious, and why did they not want him along?

Only one answer could he find to these questions. There was some trick in the matter, and it was connected with Nihilism.

What the trick was, he was determined to find out by some means, and for this reason he took his solitary expedition.

As he went out of the castle gate he said to the porter on duty:

"If any one asks for me, I am going to the camp of Nazar Beg, to find the princess."

The porter blinked and stared, but made no reply, beyond:

"Yes, most high-born."

As soon as the colonel's figure had become nearly lost to view in the long grass of the steppes, the porter muttered:

"The Americanetz's mad. How can a man like him find a Tartar aoul in the steppe? He will be lost and the wolves will pick his bones."

Then he returned to his pipe, continuing:

"But who cares? He belongs to the foreign leeches who are devouring Russia. The curse of Ivan on them all; let the wolves eat him!"

Meantime Hammond, serenely unconscious of the curses of the porter, continued his way over the steppe at an easy gallop, which the black Kirghis seemed to be able to keep up for an indefinite time.

He galloped on thus for nearly three hours, till he had completely cleared the last vestige of flocks and herds, had dropped the castle and village out of sight, and was quite alone on the steppe.

Then, after a long survey of the prospect through his field glass, he went on more leisurely, making straight for the "Rat-bite," which became plainer as he advanced.

It wanted two hours to sunset when he finally reached the edge of the little hollow, and could not resist laughing to himself to see how ludicrously appropriate was the name given it by the Cossack.

It looked exactly as if some enormous rat had taken a bite out of the steppe and the marks of the teeth were plainly visible, though, if they were teeth, each must have been about twenty feet broad.

This curious appearance he saw, had been produced by the different hardness of rocks and strata round the "Rat bite," under the wearing of the weather, and at the bottom of the little depression was a spring and pool of water, at which his Kirghis horse eagerly quenched its thirst.

He unsaddled his animal, picketed and fed it, then sat down to eat his own supper, completely sheltered from observation, the hollow of the "Rat-bite" lying about fifteen feet deep.

He scanned the steppe all round him, saw that it was empty of human beings, and that the spring was only visited by wild animals, from which he judged that it must be out of the tracks of the Tartar aouls that are in constant motion over the steppe.

The cause of this lack of visitors at the steppe he thought to be the small size of the spring and the shallowness of the pool, the Tartars having such large numbers of beasts to water that they choose by preference larger pools for their halting-places.

He was well satisfied to be left alone, for he wanted time to think over his plans, and he sat down to smoke and meditate till the arrival of Sirotkin.

He had been two weeks in the czar's service, engaged expressly to hunt up Nihilists and what had he found so far?

Nothing certain, except that the new sect permeated Russian society everywhere; that the princess and all her guests, as far as he could ascertain, belonged to it; that they regarded him as a spy; and that he was in their power, if they chose to exert it.

It remained to be seen whether the Tartars

of the steppe were Nihilists also, and whether Sirotkin, his Cossack, had been bitten with the same fever.

The absence of the princess and the alarm of her guests he could not explain to himself, but he had made up his mind to find out what it all meant.

"I am on the track of something or other," he said to himself, "and out here on the steppe I can at least take care of myself, as long as the grass lasts and game lives."

When he had come to this conclusion, the sun had nearly reached the horizon, and leveling his glass over the edge of the "Rat-bite," he made out a horseman, leading a horse, coming toward him from the east.

In a very little while he recognized the figure of the faithful Sirotkin, who rode up and saluted, saying:

"I am here as I said, most high-born. The Princess Natalie Koulikoff has gone to see her uncle the general, they say at the castle."

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE RAT-BITE.

"Get off and feed your horses, Sirotkin," said his master; "and then tell me who is this general, who is uncle to the princess, and how the people at the castle know she has gone to see him?"

Sirotkin obeyed in the same quiet, docile way in which he did everything, and when he had made his beasts comfortable he saluted his commander.

"So please your nobility, most high-born, the princess's uncle is General Anderson, who commands at Fort Alexis."

"And where is Fort Alexis?"

"By the Ust Urt Desert, high-born."

Ammonoff pulled out his staff-map and examined it. He found the fort to be almost three hundred miles off to the southeast, and exclaimed wonderingly.

"That's a great journey for a lady to take alone, on horseback."

Sirotkin saluted again.

"The people say, most high-born, that the general sent for her."

"How do they know?"

"It seems that an officer came in last night, while we were asleep."

"Indeed? Why did I not know?"

"I cannot tell, most high-born, except that they feared you might forbid the journey in the name of the czar."

"Get your supper, Sirotkin."

Sirotkin obeyed in the same placid way and Hammond considered.

He had been deceived completely by the princess; and Goryautchikoff and the rest were in the plot. When he had thought them anxious for her safety they were only preparing to go away with her.

Where were they going?

It could only be to a Nihilist meeting, and this General Anderson must, from his name, be a Swede, probably as deep in the plot as the rest.

Everything now depended for him on whether Sirotkin was faithful. He made up his mind to test the Cossack.

"Sirotkin," he said presently, as his follower sucked his fingers after finishing his dinner, "how did you find out all this? Did the people at the castle tell you?"

Sirotkin grinned respectfully.

"No, most high-born; but I kept my ears open as I was in the stable, and heard it all. They spoke outside the door. First I heard one of the ladies—"

"Baroness Boulkin?"

"I don't know, most high-born—a little dark lady it was—ask the head stableman how far it was to Fort Alexis, and he told her ten days' journey for a man, twenty for a woman in a telega. Then I pricked up my ears to listen, but the lady went away and I heard no more till I went to the kitchen. One of the maids and I, most high-born—"

Sirotkin coughed delicately.

"Are you sweet on each other? I understand. Go on, Sirotkin."

Sirotkin went on, blushing slightly:

"Exactly, most high-born. Well, Nastasia and I understand each other in all but one thing. She is a Nihilist, and talks nonsense, while I tell her that the people are happy enough, and that it is only the nobles that are Nihilists, from reading silly French books."

"Go on, Sirotkin," said Hammond, watching him closely to see if he were lying.

"And when I got to the kitchen I saw from Nastasia's manner that she was full of something and wanted to tell it, but didn't dare to. So I got her away in a part of the house where no one could see us, and made love to her till she told me what it was."

"And what was it, Sirotkin?"

"What I told your nobility. That the princess had gone to see her uncle, and that something terrible was to come out of it all. She didn't know what it was, poor girl, but had an idea that all the kitchen maids were to have silk gowns and jewels, and all the soldiers to be made officers."

"And is that all, Sirotkin?"

"All but one thing, most high-born. The Frenchman has gone, too."

"The chasseur?"

"Yes, most high-born. He went off with the officer last night, and they are to have the czar's post-horses all the way to Fort Alexis, to ride on, to plot against the czar. The curse of Ivan on them!"

"Why do you say the curse of Ivan?"

[Sirotkin looked surprised.]

"I beg your noble pardon, but I thought every one knew that. We Russians curse by the name of Ivan the Terrible, who is now a saint in heaven."

Hammond could hardly help a laugh.

"Why is he a saint, if he was so terrible?"

Sirotkin crossed himself piously.

"The blessed Ivan was called Terrible on earth, because he killed so many people, most high-born; but he always had masses said for their souls, so we Russians love his memory. He only punished the bad people that would not obey him, and did his best to send them to heaven, where the angels might teach them better things."

Sirotkin was so simple and serious that the American could not find it in his heart to disabuse him of his ideas, so he went on:

"Have you ever heard of Sofia Ivanowna, Sirotkin? Who is she?"

Sirotkin spat on the ground in disgust.

"The curse of Ivan on her, too! She is a witch, most high-born, trying to lead the Russians away from God and the czar. Thanks to the good God, I cannot read, or she might throw her spells over me."

"Indeed? Why so?"

"Sofia Ivanowna, most high-born, is the woman who sends out seditious books to be read by the people and stir them up to rebellion against the czar. If I could only catch her I would roast her alive."

"Then I judge that you are not in any sense a Nihilist, my friend."

"A Nihilist?"

Sirotkin turned crimson at the idea, and his eyes filled with tears as he asked:

"Has your nobility seen any signs of the blood of a dog in me, that you think that? Me a Nihilist? No, most high-born. The czar may lose every man in his army, but he will never see a Cossack a Nihilist. We are all free as the air. We obey our father, because he made us free."

The tone and expression of the young Cossack were too sincere for doubt, and Hammond said to him kindly:

"I don't believe you are a Nihilist, Sirotkin; but do you know, I think we can find out all about these Nihilists if we play our cards well?"

Sirotkin's eyes sparkled.

"Does your nobility think so?"

"Yes. First I want to ask you some questions about Tartars."

"I will answer, most high-born."

"Are any of them Nihilists?"

Sirotkin smiled.

"Where would be the sense of there being any such stupidity, most high-born? They are like us Cossacks; they have all the freedom they want. Besides, they neither read nor speak Russian. They are safe from Sofia."

"Then why has the Princess Natalie gone to them, Sirotkin?"

"I don't think she has, most high-born."

"But I saw her, to-day, enter the camp of Nazar Beg, and the Tartars flocked out to receive her."

Sirotkin looked surprised.

"If that is so we can find them easily, most high-born. It explains all."

"How does it?"

"Why, your nobility, the officer and the Frenchman must have been in the camp waiting for her. She would not let your nobility go with her?"

Hammond started as he recalled the scene.

"She did not. That is true. I went another way, so as not to embarrass her."

Sirotkin grinned again, respectfully.

"Then all I can say is that it was very lucky for your nobility that you came away from the castle."

"And why?"

"I think they wanted to kill you, most high-born, but have not dared to do it."

"To kill me? Why?"

"Because they know we both belong to the czar, heart and soul, most high-born. We are not safe till we get among the Tartars."

"But they are among the Tartars."

"That is true, most high-born, but I'll wager all my pay that Nazar Beg does not know a word that is going on. There is only one trouble I see."

"And what is that?"

"They may set on the Tartars to think we are the Nihilists and they the loyal people, to get them to kill us."

"They won't know where we are."

"That is true, my colonel, but to make it so, we must march all night."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we were both seen to come this way, most high-born, and unless I am mistaken,

we shall get a visit before morning. Lucky there is no moon."

Hammond looked around them. The twilight had vanished, and the stars were out in the dry air of the steppe, while the ceaseless song of the grasshopper was the only sound that disturbed the gloom.

"Do you think we could march safely to-night?" he asked.

Sirotkin rose and saluted.

"I can take your nobility straight as an arrow toward Fort Alexis, and we shall get there before they do, and be able to warn the Tartars in time."

"An excellent idea, Sirotkin. It will be a queer place to hunt down a Nihilist meeting, in a Russian fort—"

"They'll not hold it in the fort, most high-born. It would not be safe."

"Where then?"

"If it is a secret meeting, your nobility, it will be held in the Tartar aoul, where no one can understand them. They will not trust themselves among the Cossacks."

"Are there Cossacks at Alexis?"

"Yes, most high-born," the young soldier said proudly. "There are Cossacks everywhere the Russian flag floats, and never a traitor has been found among them."

"Saddle up then," said Hammond, briefly.

"We'll set out at once."

CHAPTER XIII.

A HARD RIDE.

SIROTKIN saddled the horses, and said to his master in his usual quiet way:

"Does your nobility wish to travel as the Tartars do?"

"How's that, Sirotkin?"

"Day and night, changing horses."

"We've only one to change, my friend. I'm afraid we're limited by his powers."

"Not if your nobility has plenty of money."

"What do you call plenty of money?"

"A hundred roubles, most high-born."

"Well, Sirotkin, I've a good deal more than that, twenty times as much."

Sirotkin laughed gleefully.

"Then we'll get to Alexis two days before them, for the lady cannot travel so fast."

"And how will you manage it?"

"Very easily, your nobility. In the first place it is July, and all the horses are as fat as butter."

"Well, what then?"

"And all the aouls are on the move too."

"And you propose to buy horses all the way to Alexis?"

"Not to buy them, most high-born, only to trade them. I know all the sultans of the steppe, every one of them."

"Who are they?"

"The Tartars call all their little chiefs sultans, most high-born, and they all have plenty of horses. I propose to strike straight for Alexis. We are sure to come on aouls on the way, and all we have to do is to leave our tired horses, take fresh ones, pay the sultan ten roubles for the change, and he'll think he is making his fortune."

"A very good plan if it works, but suppose he does not want to change?"

Sirotkin laughed.

"Then I must take the stick to him, of course. It is not to be supposed that a great man like your nobility can condescend to be refused by a Kirghis sultan. Besides, the visiting officers all do it. The sultans know that they are not to be trifled with."

Hammond was rather unwilling to use stick-law so freely as Sirotkin proposed, but he knew the Cossack spoke the truth, for he had often heard officers tell of their behavior among the tribes of the steppe.

"So be it, Sirotkin," he said; "but you must do all the bullying. Besides, I don't understand their language."

"I do," replied Sirotkin proudly. "Your nobility has only to trust to me and I'll bring you to Alexis in three days."

"Three days? Why, it is three hundred miles."

"If your nobility is not afraid to ride hard, no more am I."

"Forward then, Sirotkin."

They leaped into their saddles and rode off at a hand-gallop, Sirotkin keeping his course, as he had promised, straight as an arrow to the southeast.

To Hammond the ride soon became very monotonous and sleepy in effect. His horse kept up the same easy gallop that hardly stirred him in the saddle, and he began to nod over his beast's head till he fell fast asleep, riding as he was, and very near pitched off, waking with a shout of surprise.

"If your nobility wishes to sleep," said Sirotkin coolly, "it will be best to tie your belt to the saddle. For my part I am used to it, but your nobility has but just come from the city."

As they galloped along side by side, he assisted Hammond to pass the saddle-straps of pomel and cantle through his pistol-belt, and so they galloped, hour after hour, the officer doz-

ing in his saddle in a manner he would never have thought possible, and getting considerable rest in spite of the swaying of his horse, till he wakened up at the cheerful shout of Sirotkin, to see the east all ablaze with the crimson of dawn, and the conical felt tents of a Tartar aoul dotting the green steppe in front of them at less than two miles off, in the midst of vast herds of sheep and camels.

Just before the crimson changed to gold they rode into the herds, to be greeted with a great barking of dogs, while the inmates of the aoul came running out in alarm, thinking that an enemy was about to attack them, but changing their hostile attitude, the moment they saw the uniform of the Cossack, to one of hospitable welcome and obsequious desire to please.

Ammonoff was conducted at once to the *kibitka* of the sultan, a beehive-shaped tent of basket work, covered with thick sheets of felt, the universal Tartar dwelling. In the midst of the dome-shaped roof was a circular hole to allow the smoke to escape, and in the midst of the *kabitka* was a brasier of hot coals, on which incense was burning in honor of the guest.

Sirotkin—that model Cossack—had told the sultan, whose name was Ezak, that the newcomer was a grand duke and ate at the table of the czar, and Sultan Ezak was overflowing with desire to please. A sheep had been killed and breakfast was already being prepared while the horse negotiations were being carried on by Sirotkin.

Half an hour later, the two adventurers were galloping away on fresh horses, richer by a breakfast and poorer by only five roubles.

"How did you do it so cheaply?" asked the Yankee count, when Sirotkin told him of his bargain.

The young Cossack laughed.

"I told them that your nobility would speak to the czar for them, and Sultan Ezak expects to have his taxes taken off next year. How he will swear when the officer comes round as usual."

"Perhaps he will not come," replied Count Ammonoff. "I feel it my duty to see that you don't tell lies, Sirotkin. If ever I get back to St. Petersburg, I will speak to his majesty for Sultan Ezak. We owe him more than you think."

Sirotkin stared. The idea of justice to a Tartar was to him ludicrous.

"Put they are Moslem dogs, high-born," he said as if that was a clinching argument.

"And we, as Christians, are bound to set them a good example, Sirotkin."

Sirotkin looked as if he were only half convinced of that, for he answered:

"Of course your nobility knows best, but I have heard Captain Karkoff say that a Tartar is like a wolf, the only way to get any good out of him is to sell his skin for sledge-ropes."

"But surely you don't do that?"

Sirotkin grinned.

"Not exactly, most high-born, but that shows that a Tartar is worse than a wolf. The wolf has a fur and the Tartar has none."

"Nevertheless, Sirotkin, on your own showing, a Tartar is better than some Russians, for he never turns Nihilist."

"That is true, most high-born," said the Cossack as if struck by the argument.

"And we are depending on them to beat the Nihilists, so we must treat them well."

Sirotkin nodded.

Your nobility has only to give the orders and I will obey them."

Then they rode out at the same rapid pace as that which they had kept up all night, the difference between the horses being amazing.

When they rode into the Tartar camp they had been obliged to spur the animals they had been galloping all night, and even those hardy little animals had come in staggering and bathed in sweat.

The new horses were all bays, wild, shaggy-maned creatures, with small, lean heads, and they galloped on as if they were never going to stop.

"How far do you think we came last night, Sirotkin?" asked Count Ammonoff after they had lost sight of Sultan Ezak's aoul.

"A hundred and twenty versts from Toulminka, most high-born. Ezak told me that his cousin, Sultan Bantoo, is at the Sweet Pools of Kyduk, just a hundred and forty versts further, so that we must manage to get there before the sun sets, if we expect to get into camp without being shot at for enemies."

"Quite true, Sirotkin. I forgot that in the steppe every man takes care of his own life and property."

So they shook their bridles and let their horses have free head till the spirited creatures began to shorten their stride and evince a disposition to walk.

Hammond was not used to this sort of riding, but he watched Sirotkin, and noticed that he let his beast have its own way entirely for two or three hours, till, from a succession of long gallops and short walks, it had changed to one of short gallops and long walks, and the officer found, from his watch, that they had been going for three hours.

Then Sirotkin observed:

"Now, most high-born, it is time we used the

spur a little, or we shall not get to Sultan Bautoo before dark."

They touched their animals with the spur, a device the horses were unused to, for the Tartars use whips altogether, and the consequence was a gallop of two hours more, alternated with short walks, till the little steeds were so tired that they did not heed a slight touch any more. Then the Sirotkin set the example of giving a severe dig, which roused them again, and so they kept on all the long day and afternoon till the sun sloped to the horizon behind them, and Sirotkin cried:

"Yonder are the kibitkas of Bautoo, most high-born. We shall get fresh horses there, and they will go twice as well in the night."

It was true. Hammond saw the beehive-shaped tents ahead and knew that they had ridden ninety-three miles since sunrise by dint of merciless use of the spur during the afternoon. Their horses were reeking with sweat and reeled as they galloped, but both neighed at the sight of the camp, and got in without falling.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OWL'S FEATHER

SULTAN BAUTOO proved to be a little, dried-up old man, with an owl's feather in his cap, of which he appeared to be very proud, for he welcomed Hammond as an equal, without any obsequiousness, and told Sirotkin, when he began boasting of his master's intimacy with the czar:

"It is well. I also have a right to sit at table with the czar by virtue of my owl's feather."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Hammond, when the answer was translated to him.

Sirotkin looked disgusted.

"He is only an animal, most high-born; but all these Tartars are animals. He wears an owl's feather because he is descended from an old animal they called Climgis, thousands of years ago. As if any one cared for old Climgis now!"

"Do you mean Jengis Khan?" asked the Yankee Cossack, looking at Bautoo with more interest.

The old Tartar nodded violently as he caught the sound, and jabbered very fast with much gesticulation, Sirotkin giving the gist of his meaning.

"He says, most high-born, that Chingis Khan was the greatest ruler in the world, and that the czar had to pay tribute to him, and to one Bauroo Khan, his grandson, wherefore all his descendants are kings to day and equal to the czar, being privileged to wear the owl's feather."

"Tell him," said Hammond, "that I have often heard of his great ancestor, and that I am glad to see his descendant, but that we are very anxious to get forward on our road, and are willing to trade our horses for fresh ones, and give ten roubles for the difference."

Sirotkin translated, and old Bautoo's eyes glistened with avarice, for money in the steppe is worth a good deal, and the ordinary price of a horse is less than twenty roubles.

A bargain was quickly struck, and a sheep killed for supper, costing two roubles more, and affording a feast to all Bautoo's relations, who invoked blessings on the head of the stranger as they gorged themselves with half-raw mutton out of a caldron.

They remained an hour at Bautoo's camp, and set out again under the starlight at the same rapid pace.

Both riders secured themselves in the saddle to avoid falling off under the pressure of sleep, and rode on, half dozing, all night long.

In the morning no soul was in sight and the horses began to flag, but the riders were fully awake again, and by a liberal use of the spur succeeded in reaching at noon the camp of Sultan Esa, who proved to be a hospitable, jolly fellow, and a great patron of falconry.

He informed them that they were still a hundred and eighty versts from Fort Alexis, and that if they would rest at his camp till nightfall, he would ride on with them himself with relays, and engage to bring them to Alexis by daylight.

Hammond was surprised.

"A hundred and twenty miles in one night! It is impossible!" he said.

Sultan Esa laughed at the answer, for he understood a little Russian.

"Impossible the way you Russians ride, but not as we Tartars do it. But you will need to be awake. A sleeping man cannot change horses at a gallop."

Sirotkin told his master that it would be well to accept Esa's offer.

"There is another soul at Alexis, most high-born," he said, "and this Sultan Esa is less like a wolf than most Tartars. If your nobility wishes to keep your arrival a secret from General Anderson, we shall have to arrange with Sultan Esa about a disguise, or we shall find out nothing."

Hammond was struck with the interest which Sirotkin displayed in the expedition and asked him:

"What do you mean by a disguise?"

Sirotkin grinned respectfully.

"It is not for me to advise your nobility; but if General Anderson finds that an officer of the czar is near the fort, he will surely send warning to his friends not to come there, and we shall lose our chance of finding out anything."

"And what do you propose to do then?"

"If your nobility will permit me, I know Sultan Esa very well. In fact, my mother's uncle's second-cousin is one of his wives; so we are relations. I can trust him, and he will help us. I will say to him, 'Esa, it is necessary the commandant at Alexis shall not know that we are here. You must give us both dresses to cover our uniforms, and tell your cousin, Sultan Koodook, at Alexis, to hide us. I am your cousin and my master is a traveler who is trying to get to India without letting the Russians know it.'"

"And what will he say?"

"He will say to me, 'Sirotkin, we are kinsmen and my kibitka is yours. Do with me as you will.'"

"Be it so," said Hammond resignedly. "To tell the truth, I'm too sleepy to argue. But if we stop now, shan't we be too stiff to do any fast riding to-night?"

"I'll see about that, most high-born," said Sirotkin. "We shall have to do as the Tartars do to take out the stiffness."

"And what's that, Sirotkin?"

"You shall see, most high-born."

He went out and held a short talk with Sultan Esa, outside the kibitka, and then returned, saying to his master:

"It is all arranged, for twenty roubles, most high-born. You must strip and be wrapped in a warm sheepskin."

"Strip and be wrapped in a warm sheepskin! What do you mean?"

"I'm going to do the same, most high-born. It's wonderful how it rests one."

Hammond resigned himself to the infliction, which he did not clearly understand.

He had been assigned a small kibitka by himself, and when he took off his clothing he was not surprised to find that he was in a high fever from the long ride and exhaustion, his pulse beating rapidly and feebly, his eyes burning, every limb aching. The cool grass on which he lay down felt grateful to his fevered frame, and he was surprised when Sultan Esa came in, crying:

"What are you doing? Do you want to ride to-night or not? You'll be stiff as a stick in ten minutes, if you lie there in the cold."

"What am I to do then?" asked Hammond.

For answer Sultan Esa took him to the door of the hut and showed him a sheep, a big beast, very fat.

"There's your bed," he said. "You are to sleep inside him."

Hammond stared.

"What do you mean?"

Esa laughed.

"You're not used to our Tartar ways," he said in broken Russian. "It is a costly bed, but you are a great lord and we must get you to Alexis to-night."

Then he said something to the man that had the sheep, and told Hammond to lie down in the sun by the beast.

Not knowing what to make of it all, the young officer did as directed, and in a moment more was deluged with the warm blood from the sheep, which was stabbed to the heart over him, held by four men, while two more rubbed the warm blood all over him, with vigorous friction of their horny palms.

No sooner had the blood ceased to flow, than the sheep was skinned in such a short order that it was like pulling off a glove, and the Tartars rolled up Hammond in the warm skin, carried him into the kibitka, laid him down on a large fur rug, and Esa said:

"Don't stir. In a little while you will be asleep. To-night you will be able to ride to Alexis."

Hammond lay there in his warm bath of blood, wondering and somewhat disgusted; but before he could make up his mind whether to be sick or not, he felt his eyes closing, and fell fast asleep to wake up in a profuse sweat, late in the afternoon, the fever and stiffness gone from his limbs and to hear Sultan Esa saying:

"Now, most high-born, it is time to be bathed. You can ride to Alexis."

He rolled himself out of the sheepskin, and went outside, where he was thoroughly drenched from head to foot from leathern buckets of ice-cold water that made him gasp, but put so much vigor in his frame that he said to Esa as he crossed:

"Your Tartar medicine works wonders."

The Tartar showed his teeth in a grin of pleasure. He was a man of medium height, with a chest like a bull and very broad shoulders. He wore the usual Tartar dress, a conical cap of lamb's wool with a turban twisted round it, a shirt and loose trousers of cotton, with a long gown called a *kalat*, over all, girded by a silk sash of bright color.

On his feet he wore red leather boots, with such preposterously high heels that his walk was crippled, and he had a long heavy whip slung to his wrist.

"Come, most high-born," he said, "you feel no more pain: is it not so?"

Hammond stretched himself and was amazed to find that all the stiffness had left him entirely. He felt ready to ride again.

"That is well," said Sultan Esa. "Now we must make a Tartar out of you for this night. We will drink koomiss for our ride. Meat is too heavy."

Hammond had often heard of the milk-wine of the Tartars, but had never drank any. His host compelled him to swallow several cups of stuff which tasted like bad buttermilk with a great deal of gas in it, and then said:

"Come, it is time we were ready. Here is Sirotkin. You shall ride Tartar fashion, one night."

As he spoke Sirotkin came out of a kibitka near by, ready for his journey and Hammond saw a whole troop of horses coming up.

CHAPTER XV.

A TARTAR RIDE.

As the horses came up, Hammond saw that there were four strings of them, tied together with horsehair halters, about three feet apart, and each horse having a straw sack on its back, girthed tight, while one had a Tartar saddle above the straw sack.

Two of the strings he recognized as being meant for himself and Sirotkin, on account of the saddles, the other two were as evidently for Esa and another Tartar who led up the whole lot.

Each string had six horses.

"Now," said Esa, "you shall be at Alexis before daylight. Take this whip, most high-born. No use to ride Tartar fashion without a whip."

He handed the officer a heavy whip of steppe manufacture. The handle was about two feet long, but the lash measured nearly twenty feet, and with it one could reach the outer horse of each string with ease.

Then the Tartar scanned his guests very narrowly, saying:

"This will never do. You have no sashes. I must gird you up."

He called to his wives, and out came near a dozen girls, giggling, who proceeded to wind round the waist of Hammond and Sirotkin long broad sashes, with which they swathed them as tightly as if they were laced in corsets, and Hammond asked his servant:

"What's that for?"

"To keep us from shaking to pieces," was the consoling reply. "They all have to do it on these rides, most high-born."

Hammond submitted; but he felt so trussed up and crippled he could hardly get into his saddle.

Then the four men, Sultan Esa, Sirotkin, Hammond, and a young Tartar who was called Azim, rode slowly out of the camp, heading toward the southeast.

When they were clear of the herds, Esa said:

"Now, most high-born, push down as much of your sash as you can toward your hips, but don't loosen it. We shall begin to gallop in a minute, and after that there is no more rest till we get to Alexis."

Hammond obeyed, and felt a little easier. He could breathe now, and felt the tightness of the sash less oppressive.

Then Esa swung his whip in the air, gave a wild yell, and away went the twenty-four horses at a tearing gallop, as if they were racing for first place.

If they had ridden before, now they flew; and for a good hour they kept up the break-neck pace, till Hammond found the horse he rode beginning to labor hard, and at the same minute Sirotkin cried:

"Time to change, Sultan Esa."

Sultan Esa waved his whip; gave a crack to the outside horse that made his string huddle close together, and placed both hands on the withers of the next horse.

"Change!" he shouted.

In another minute he had vaulted on the next horse, still at the same wild gallop; Azim followed his example, and both Tartars went on, leaving their comrades behind.

Sirotkin imitated the maneuver with success, and Hammond, after some management, succeeded in doing the same, when it seemed to him as if he had mounted a fresh horse, and the animal he had just left shook its head, gave a neigh of satisfaction, and galloped on as if it had just come out of the stable, though it was reeling a moment before with the weight on its back.

Now on they went, with shouts and cries, at the same wild pace, for another hour, when a second change took place.

This time Hammond had become used to the maneuver, and succeeded in making his change without checking the stride of his animal, causing Esa to remark:

"You'd soon make a Tartar, most high-born."

The third horse proved to be a wild one which had never been ridden before, and ran away incontinently, frightened at Hammond's spurs; so that, when at last it began to flag, the Tartar chief announced that they had gone nearly a

hundred versts already, and could afford to ride more easily.

Indeed this became necessary, for though the led horses still went on freely, they began to discover that the fourth and fifth were not as fresh under their riders as the first and third had been.

The first and second had galloped an hour each under weight, the third an hour and a quarter, the fourth only lasted three quarters of an hour, the fifth half an hour, while the sixth began to flag in twenty minutes.

Then Esa called a walk, and began to shorten up his horses by their halters; when he sprung up on the backs of two at a time, standing, so as to divide his weight, and dashed on at the same pace as before.

Azim followed his example; but Hammond, failing a proper circus training, was afraid to try it, till he saw Sirotkin jump up readily enough, when he took heart of grace and followed his example.

He found it not so hard as he had supposed, for the horses seemed to have been trained to run close together, and the broad soft straw pads made his footing secure, when he took hold of the reins.

In this way they galloped on for three more hours, till the golden streaks of dawn began to brighten the east, when Esa pointed to a shapeless mound on the horizon and said:

"Alexis. And yonder is the aoul of my kinsman, Sultan Koodook. We can halt and rest the horses."

They pulled up and looked at the animals they had ridden so fast and far. Hammond could hardly believe it, but they had come a hundred and twenty miles in about eight hours, and yet not a single horse had given out entirely.

"Now," said Esa to Sirotkin, "either we must go on, at the risk of alarming the aoul, or it will be light and we shall be seen at the fort. Which will his nobility prefer to do?"

"Go on, by all means," was the reply, and away they went again, at a rapid amble, the only symptom of fatigue that the horses had yet shown in a body.

Just as it grew light, they lost themselves in herds of camels, and Sirotkin said:

"Now we are safe. The soldiers have not got up yet, and before they see us we shall be as good Tartars as any one."

A great barking of dogs showed that the camp was alarmed, but as soon as Sultan Esa was recognized the kibitka of the chief was thrown open for the reception of the guests and Hammond found himself hidden away in a very short time, while Esa explained to Sultan Koodook that "this was a great lord who ate with the czar and could hang every Kirghis on the steppe if he wished, therefore it was important to obey his orders to the letter."

Sultan Koodook promised faithfully. He only wanted to know what the orders were.

Hammond gave them through Sirotkin.

He wished to have his arrival kept an entire secret from the Russians in the fort. If it were allowed to escape he would exterminate the whole tribe.

If the Russians asked any questions the Kirghis were to say that:

"Sultan Esa had come to see Sultan Koodook to arrange for a great hawking-party and had gone away again."

Sultan Koodook was delighted at the idea of a mystery by which he should be made the confidant of so great a man, and promised readily, when breakfast was served to all the riders of the night, in the form of the inevitable sheep, cut up into small pieces and cooked in a big caldron.

When it was over Hammond and Sirotkin were left at peace to sleep out the day, and neither woke up till the stars were in the sky.

Then Sultan Koodook put in his head to say through Sirotkin:

"So please your mighty highness, Sultan Esa's people will be here the day after tomorrow, and we shall give your resplendency a sight you can see in no other aoul: eagles that can kill wolves."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STEPPE HUNT.

HAMMOND was puzzled at first what to think of Koodook's news, but after a little questioning made out that the commandant at Alexis had sent couriers to the aouls in the neighborhood, announcing that he expected some very distinguished visitors, to whom he wished to show the Tartar method of using eagles for the chase.

"And as Sultan Esa is the best falconer on the steppe," pursued Koodook, "we have sent for him to show them how it is done."

Hammond knew well enough who the visitors must be, but he was puzzled to account for their desire to witness a hawking-party, when he knew that the Princess Koulikoff had seen the sport often.

He concluded there must be a trick in it somewhere, and determined to find out what he could, if it were possible to do so without discovery.

But what was he to do? If the party of

Russians mingled freely with the Kirghis, he and his companion could not fail to be recognized.

They were both tall men, with features of the European stamp, so different from the squat, broad-faced Tartars that any disguise they could assume would not avail to conceal them.

He had found Sirotkin so shrewd and helpful that he determined to ask his advice, and began:

"Sirotkin, why do you suppose these people want to go out hawking?"

"That depends on who they are, most high-born. If they are only great people they want to see the eagles at work."

"Is that anything wonderful, then?"

"Yes, most high-born. These Tartars, though they are but animals, have a gift of training the big black eagle they call the *bearcoat*. It is big enough to kill a wolf, ay, or a man, too, if he gets in the way when it is angry."

"But allowing all this, I don't suppose but what they've seen the thing before."

"That is possible, most high-born."

"And supposing they are, as I begin to think, leaders of the Nihilist party, why have they come out here?"

Sirotkin scratched his head.

"I don't know, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless they want to hold a secret talk, most high-born."

"But they can do that anywhere."

"Not while the Cossacks are round, most high-born," said Sirotkin proudly. "I have already told your nobility that no Cossack can be corrupted. The officers would not dare to try them."

"Why not?"

Sirotkin's eyes flashed.

"They tried it once in St. Petersburg, most high-born. An officer, a *polkovnik*—a colonel, most high-born—allowed some of Sofia Ivanowna's books to be left in the barrack-room, and one of the men read one aloud to the Cossacks."

"What was the consequence?"

"They burned the books, all but one, before the man had read a page, and took the last one to the colonel. They all went in a body, and requested the colonel to have it publicly burned on parade."

"And what said he?"

"He looked pale, most high-born. He thought it was a mutiny, till he found what had happened. Then he did what they wished. If he had not done it—"

"Well, what then?"

"They would have gone to the palace in a body to complain to the czar, and he knew it, most high-born. Since then, no one has attempted to corrupt the free Cossacks."

Sirotkin spoke with great pride as he told the story, and Hammond saw that he could depend on him.

"Well, I think this is going to be a Nihilist gathering," he said to the Cossack, "and I want to know how we can attend it."

Sirotkin considered a little.

"I only know one way, most high-born."

"And what is that?"

"We must go off into the steppe and watch them from a distance. They will hold their council by themselves, with Tartars to watch for them. If we dress as Tartars, and Koodook will allow us, we can creep close enough to them to listen. But we must keep out of sight."

"Will you speak to Koodook about it?"

"Yes, most high-born."

Sirotkin went away, and came back to tell his master:

"Koodook says the party will be here by tomorrow night, and the hawking will take place next day. If we wish to hide, he will send us out with the camels and beaters, that are to drive in the game. No one will notice us in the crowd."

So it was settled, and very early next day Hammond and Sirotkin, their Russian uniforms covered with long Tartan kalats, their heads surmounted with conical caps of black lambswool, went off on horseback, with a crowd of dirty Kirghis Tartars and about a hundred camels, to make a wide sweep into the steppe and drive in the game toward Fort Alexis.

They remained out all day, and toward evening began to return slowly toward the fort, forming a long line and driving before them a profusion of game.

At midnight they halted and built a line of small fires, to keep the game from running the lines.

Wood being a scarcity in the steppe, the only fuel they had was the dried droppings of horses and camels, which abounded everywhere; and by the little glimmering fires they sat till dawn, chatting to pass away the time.

At the first streak of daylight the line set forward again, and Sirotkin said to his master as they rode on:

"Now, most high born, let us keep close to the camels, and gallop away when the rush begins. There is a water-hole about three miles from Alexis that is just the place for us to hide."

"But, if we hide, we shall not see our people."

"I will take care of that, most high-born."

They rode on, the game getting thicker in front of them as they advanced, till about an hour after sunrise, when they saw on the green steppe, a long way off, a line of moving figures coming to meet them, and Sirotkin observed:

"There come the other beaters to make a surround, most high-born. Our time to get away is when the noise is greatest."

They had kept aloof from the Kirghis so far, the men treating them with great respect; but now Sirotkin rode down the line, warning them that they were on no account to betray the fact that strangers had been with them during the night.

The men promised to be dumb; and the Cossack clinched the point for them by telling them that if they told who were their visitors they should all be taken to the fort and beaten with sticks, while if they kept the secret each man should get ten roubles.

"They'll never betray us now, most high-born," he told Hammond, "for they have seen our uniforms and know that we have power to do as we say."

Then they rode on again, and soon came in plain sight of the opposing line of beaters coming from the fort.

It was much longer than their own, at least five hundred mounted men being out; but Hammond noticed that there was not a Cossack in the crowd, while in the center he saw the very party he had come to track, dressed in plain clothes and well armed.

But there was no lady among them.

He counted them over carefully. There were eleven men, one of whom he thought must be the commandant of Alexis.

Nine had left Toulminka, and here were eleven. Who was the eleventh?

Before he had settled the point to his own satisfaction, the opposing line of beaters, which overlapped their flanks by nearly a mile, began to close in on either side in the form of a crescent, and the space incircled by the surround was full of game, running from side to side in a wild state of alarm.

Deer and antelopes, wild boars, hares, bustards and flocks of grouse afraid to fly over the camels and horses, dashed to and fro in the wildest alarm, while the striped bodies of three of the small steppe tigers crept to and fro outside the rush, the animals trying to make up their mind for a dash for life.

A pack of wolves circled round the whole mob at tremendous speed, every now and then making a snarling rush at the horsemen, but always recoiling before they got near enough to bite.

"Now, most high-born," said Sirotkin, touching his master's arm. "Now's the time to get off. See, they're all busy at the game. They won't see us."

Hammond looked and saw that the whole party of strangers had halted, and the men were intently gazing at the mob of animals in the ring, while Sultan Esa was riding out, in his gay crimson palat, with a huge black eagle fluttering on a perch in front of his saddle.

Esa had first unhooded the bird, and it was turning its head rapidly from side to side, as if selecting its prey.

He could not resist stopping a moment to see what would happen, though Sirotkin kept pulling his sleeve and whispering energetically:

"Come! come! or they'll see us."

A moment later the pack of wolves went scampering by, and the black eagle swooped away like a goshawk, near the ground, reached out its great talons and clutched one of the wolves. Hammond saw the beast go over and turn its head to bite, while its comrades fled in dismay.

Then Sirotkin cried in despair:

"Your nobility will be known if we don't go in a hurry."

Hammond saw the force of what the Cossack said, turned his horse, and both galloped away just as the beaters yelled loudest and every one was crazy at the sport.

As they fled, Hammond looked over his shoulder, saw three black eagles in the air mounting for a swoop, and he gave a slight sigh at the necessity which made him forego such a sport.

The steppe was silent all round the two as they rode on, but in a very short time they saw the gleam of water ahead of them, got into some high reeds, and Sirotkin said:

"Here we are, most high-born. All the Nihilists in Russia can't find us here."

He led the way through shallow pools, keeping in the water so as to hide the tracks of the horses, and finally drew up beside a round, deep pool, about fifty feet across, the ground rising beside it. Here they dismounted, and Sirotkin pointed to a short, scrubby pollard-willow, the only tree to be seen for miles, saying:

"There, most high-born. Keep on the other side of that tree, and I'll help you up. From the fork of the branches you can see all over the steppe for miles."

Hammond did as the Cossack advised, climbed the tree and instantly caught sight of the hunt, in full progress, less than a mile off.

Leveling his field-glass, he could distinguish the figures of the Russians from the Tartars, and saw that the circle had contracted, that the game were beginning to break out, and that the hunt had become a massacre.

Presently the circle of horsemen broke up, and the men began to race after the game, which by one consent took to the water and came tearing toward the very place where Hammond and Sirotkin were hidden.

As soon as this became plain, the Yankee Cossack called down to his faithful follower to take away the horses, and Sirotkin, readily comprehending, called back:

"All right, most high-born. I'll wait in sight of the tree. No one can see you if you keep close."

Then he went away among the reeds, and Hammond flattened himself down in the fork of the branches, sheltered by the green leaves, to wait for events.

Luckily for him the tree was hollow at the top for two or three feet, and his body was completely sheltered from view below, while with ready wit he took off his black lamb-skin cap, made a shield of green branches for his head, and then peered over the edge of the hollow into the marshy steppe.

He had not long to wait.

First came a mob of antelopes, tripping and stumbling in the water, followed by a wild boar, and a moment later three wolves dashed in and hid themselves in the tall reeds.

Then came Sultan Esa and several of the Kirghis, who began to jabber together as they rode right under the very willow in which Hammond was hidden.

A few moments of intense anxiety and he heard the voice of Goryautchikoff calling out in Russian:

"Don't go too far, general, the water gets deep in the holes, and her highness might come to trouble."

"Her highness knows this spot better than you do, Goryautchikoff," replied a deep voice, and Hammond saw a tall officer, the only one in uniform of the whole party, a man whose breast was full of orders and decorations. "This is the very spot we have selected for our meeting."

Goryautchikoff looked round him in a surprised way, ejaculating:

"A strange selection surely. Are we to form a circle up to our knees in water, my dear Anderson?"

General Anderson pointed to the tree as he answered:

"That is my reason. It is better to stand up to our knees in water than to be spied on, and if we put a sentry up that tree no one can come within a half mile without being discovered. I don't trust even the Kirghis. Some of them understand Russian."

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE WILLOW TREE.

HAMMOND thrilled all over with excitement as he heard them speak. Sirotkin's plan was likely to receive a checkmate from the very circumstance of the tree being where it was.

As the only conspicuous object in the level steppe every one knew it, and he expected to hear the next proposition to climb the tree and examine it.

But Goryautchikoff only shrugged his shoulders, with the remark:

"It seems to me we have come a great way to climb up a tree in a swamp. Why can't we meet in the fort in your rooms?"

"Simply because I cannot trust all my officers, and the men are absolutely certain to report anything suspicious. Ah, here come the rest of them, and we can make the arrangement now before the Kirghis."

As he spoke, Hammond, with beating heart, saw filing through the shallow water the men he had come all the way from Toulminka to entrap.

He recognized them all except one, a slender, boyish-looking figure, dressed in a dandified velvet shooting-jacket, and otherwise tricked out in a way rare to see in Russia.

The face of this person he could not see, for it was concealed by a broad white felt hat, but presently he recognized with a start the voice of the Princess Koulikoff as she said to Anderson:

"Well, general, the hunt has been a fine one. What are we to do to night?"

Hammond saw Sultan Esa underneath the tree in which he was perched, and heard him answer in Russian:

"If the gracious gentleman wishes to try it, the wild boars come here every night to drink, and there is good shooting."

Hammond saw the Nihilists look at each other as the Kirghis spoke in Russian, and General Anderson said to Esa:

"Where did you learn our tongue, friend?"

Esa laughed.

"I picked it up, most high-born, when I was a hostage at Semipalatinsk. Will your nobility try the boars to-night? It is possible you may have a tiger or two."

"We'll see," returned Anderson, shortly. "If

we come out we shall not want any of your men with us. You can return to your own camps as soon as you like."

Sultan Esa bowed low.

"Your nobility is very good," he said. "We will do as you desire. But I warn your nobility that this is a dangerous place at night. The steppe tigers always lie in wait at the water holes, and I have known more than one man killed from going out at night alone."

General Anderson curled his lip.

"Yes, of you Tartars. We can take care of ourselves. Any one who lies in wait for us will be riddled with bullets, be he man or beast. We are well armed."

"Then, if your nobility has no further use for my services," said Sultan Esa, "I will take my departure."

And so saying, he took away his troop of Kirghis, while the Russians gathered under a tree and began to talk in low tones.

"Is this the place?" said the princess glancing round her apprehensively. "Who would have thought that man understood Russian? One cannot be too careful."

"Just what I've said all along," retorted the general, sharply. "Since the last taking off every one is suspicious. It is sufficient for us to be seen conversing to set these ignorant Cossacks thinking there is a conspiracy going on. Yes, this is the place, and I have provided for the meeting by the pretext of a hunt at night. It is true what he says about the tigers. The water-holes are the very places to find them. I dare say there may be one in the hollow of that tree over our heads now."

The princess uttered an exclamation, and they all backed their horses away, while Goryautchikoff cried out:

"If there is, I vote we drive him out!"

As he spoke he drew his pistols, and Hammond ducked down into the hole in the tree, feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

Then he heard the general's voice, earnest and warning:

"Take care what you do. Get out of the way, Natalie. If we only wound him, he'll leap down and charge us."

"Let me get out of the way, gentlemen!" cried the princess herself, laughingly, and then the concealed aide-de-camp heard the splash of the water as she rode away.

A moment later the general said:

"If you want to find out whether there be a tiger in there, fire all together at the top of the trunk where the wood is thin. If you hit him, he'll come sure enough."

Hammond crouched down closer, and began to wish himself out of the scrape.

A moment later came the cracking of pistols and the splintering of wood as the bullets slapped into the trunk.

Chips of bark were knocked over the concealed aide-de-camp, and one bullet went through the solid wood below him, and stuck half-way out in the hollow close to his body.

A little more force and it would have hit him on the left side over the heart.

The cracking of pistols went on for nearly a minute, when the princess called out from the rear:

"You're throwing away your shots; there is no one in there."

Her voice sounded like music from heaven to Hammond, who was all in a sweat and had almost made up his mind to rise up and fire back in his desperation.

The firing ceased, and the general said:

"That's a pretty good test, gentlemen. I know of no living creature that could have withstood it so quietly. We shall not have to rout out a tiger to-night."

"So much the better," returned Goryautchikoff. "I've no fancy for the job, myself."

Then Hammond peered cautiously over the edge, and saw that they were preparing to ride away toward the fort visible over the steppe.

Five minutes later he was alone, and thanking Heaven devoutly for his escape.

The little band of Russians grew smaller as it receded, and the Kirghis Tartars were scattered over the steppe, collecting the dead game and returning to their aoul, when Hammond heard a voice in the reeds:

"Your nobility! Most high-born! Are you hurt by those sons of the devil?"

Looking down, Hammond saw the visage of the faithful Sirotkin, peering through the reeds and saw that the Cossack had both revolvers drawn.

"I'm all right," he called down cautiously. "I'll be down as soon as it is safe. Keep still and don't show yourself."

He waited till all danger of detection was over, and then slid down the tree and joined his faithful follower, who at once began:

"Oh my master, my master! The curse of Ivan the Terrible on them all! I thought they had killed you or hurt you. I was waiting to see you jump out."

"And suppose I had, Sirotkin? What would you have done?"

Sirotkin put back his pistols inside his palat, where he had them hidden.

"I was going to help your nobility," he said simply. "I think we two, hidden, could have

bowled over five or six of them, for God and his majesty, our father czar."

"So I think, Sirotkin; but in that case we should have missed what we came to find."

"And what is that, most high born?"

"They are going to hold a Nihilist meeting here to night and put a sentry into that tree," said Hammond. "What shall we do?"

Sirotkin seemed overcome with delight.

"That is what we want, most high-born. The sentry will have a fine time of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that the hollow of that tree is a favorite place for the steppe tigers most high-born."

"So General Anderson said, and that is why they fired at the tree to rout out any tiger who might be there."

Sirotkin began to laugh.

"Did they think a tiger would be fool enough to wait there in daylight? Not a bit of it, most high-born. Tigers have sense as well as we have. They know that the night is the time for the deer to come and drink, and that is when they come. Just about sunset you'll see one coming to this tree, if he didn't get killed in the hunt."

"What had we better do when he comes?"

Sirotkin considered awhile.

"I have it," he said at last. "What does your nobility say to my playing tiger and keeping them out of the tree?"

"What do you mean by playing tiger?"

"Why, we can wait till the tiger comes, and shoot him here in the reeds. Then we'll hoist him into the tree, I'll get in with the dead body and make them think that a live tiger's up in the tree."

"But they'll shoot at you, as they did at me."

"Let them shoot, most high-born. If they couldn't hit you, they won't be able to hit me. It will be dark, and I shall have the tiger's body for a shield. I can growl like the best tiger you ever heard."

"But suppose we don't find a tiger?"

"Then we must hide in the reeds and creep as close as I did. But that will be dangerous, most high-born."

"Why, Sirotkin?"

"Because the reeds are certain to be full of tigers to-night, most high born, whether we find the one that lives in the tree or not."

"Are you sure of that?"

"So sure, your nobility, that the Tartars call this place the 'Tigers' Swamp' and have done so from time immemorial."

Hammond looked round him. It was now nearly noon, and the swamp seemed empty of inhabitants; but he knew that Sirotkin must be telling the truth from the scarcity of cover elsewhere.

"Let us find the horses," he said, "and ride away. Where have you hidden them?"

Sirotkin led the way through thick and lofty reeds to an open pool of shallow water, where the two horses were tied to bunches of reeds, nibbling away at the water-grass as if they only half liked it.

"Sultan Esa passed by me," he explained, "and he saw you up in the tree, so he told me to look after you. He has sharp eyes."

"I should say so. And he pretended not to see or notice me."

"Sultan Esa married my mother's uncle's second cousin," replied Sirotkin with some pride, "and we have no traitors in our family."

"I wish I could see him," said Hammond, in a thoughtful tone; "but that's not possible now."

"Why not, most high-born?"

"He has gone back to his band. I heard him take his leave of Anderson."

Sirotkin began to laugh.

"Your nobility does not know Sultan Esa. He is a Tartar, it is true; but he married my mother's uncle's second-cousin, and we have no traitors in our family. If your nobility wishes to see Sultan Esa, he is close by on the steppe, waiting for us."

"Then let us go to him, in heaven's name."

They rode out of the swamp into a broad plain, where the grass was covered with flowers, and where they found Sultan Esa, as Sirotkin had said, waiting for them, with a dozen of his men, stretched out on the grass by their grazing horses.

As they came up, Sultan Esa rose to meet Hammond, bowing low. His usually frank, manly face, with its strong scrubby beard, looked grave and anxious as he asked:

"Your nobility was not hurt in the tree?"

"Not a bit, Sultan."

"The Prophet be thanked! What does your nobility now require?"

"I want relays of horses to-night to take me to Toulminka and the train. Can I have them, or not?"

Esa considered.

"When will you require them, most high-born? It will take twelve hours to set the relays ahead of you. You will take, of course, six horses to a relay, to go fast, and you want a relay at every aoul."

"That is it, Esa, and I shall need them to-night, after this council has taken place."

Esa nodded.

"Your nobility shall have them by the midnight hour. We have enough here for the first stage. Koodook shall lend them. I will send to him at once."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NIHILISTS' CIRCLE.

THE bugles of the Cossacks at Fort Alexis had sounded "lights out" nearly an hour, when General Anderson rode out of the fort gate, saying to the officer of the guard:

"We shall be back about daybreak. Let no one follow us. We can take care of ourselves, and the gentlemen are crazy to kill tigers on their own account."

Lieutenant Boriskin shrugged his shoulders as he saw the troop of civilians file out, and he muttered to himself:

"Queer tastes some people have, going after tigers in the dark. They must want to be eaten up alive, I think."

Once outside, the general rode on, followed by the others in pairs, a single horseman lagging behind to watch that no one followed from the fort.

They were all unusually silent and glum, as if indisposed to converse, and it was not till they reached the swamp on the steppe that Anderson said to his companion, whose broad hat marked the disguised princess:

"We are near the place now. Let the men go first and search the swamp, for I'm told it is a great place for tigers."

"So much the fitter place for us to meet," said she, in a low voice. "Driver to the desert and the wild beasts for refuge, we are as low as we can be, surely. When we have destroyed all that exists, we can think of reconstruction."

"It is emblematic of our cause," said the voice of Goryautchikoff, in the next couple. "Not till we have rooted out slavery can we hope to be free. Here on the steppe, at least, we are free to speak our minds."

"Not so," returned General Anderson, hastily. "Not till we have set our guards and pickets. There is a spy in every Cossack and Kirghis. If they suspected our errand to-night, we should be followed of a certainty."

"Boukin will attend to any one who tries that experiment," said Goryautchikoff, with a laugh. "He has not such a head as his amiable wife, but he made the ace of spades into a five-spot yesterday with a revolver in ten seconds."

This sally was followed by a low laugh in the party, and the princess remarked:

"Baron Boukin is a valuable man. I wish that some of the rest of you knew as much as he does. If he ever fires at the tyrant, he will not merely wound him, as Nobel* did the German brute."

"Why not send him in to look for the tigers," said Goryautchikoff, in the same jesting tone.

"Because he has worse enemies than tigers to guard against in the rear," retorted the princess.

"Forward there, the rest of you, and prepare the circle. Don't you know we've no time to spare?"

Thus urged, the horsemen rode into the swamp in a line, with a great splashing, heading for the willow tree island.

They arrived there, to find all quiet, and General Anderson called out:

"Brother Goryautchikoff will climb the tree and act as sentry to our queen, while she holds her circle. In the name of Sofia Ivanowna!"

Instantly a deep hush fell upon all the little band, and Goryautchikoff entirely dropped his flippant manner, as he answered:

"In the name of Sofia Ivanowna I obey."

He rode up to the tree and was about to stand up in the saddle to help him in climbing, when a furious growl came from the summit, and all the horses backed away, snorting with terror.

Out came half a score of pistols instantly, and a rapid fusillade was opened on the top of the tree, followed by a chorus of savage snarls and growls, as something began to shake the foliage.

"Fire fast, he is about to spring," said the deep voice of Anderson; and the pistols were emptied into the summit of the tree.

The firing only lasted about twenty seconds, and then the general said:

"It is enough. He must be dead. Load your weapons and climb up, Goryautchikoff."

Then was heard the clinking of hammers as the horsemen rapidly reloaded their revolvers, and Goryautchikoff again advanced to the foot of the willow tree.

All was quiet up in the foliage, and in a moment more the Nihilist had begun his climb, when out sprang the head of a tiger close to him with an angry snarl, and Goryautchikoff slid down with a cry of irrepressible alarm.

* Referring to the attempt of Dr. Louis Nobel to kill the emperor of Germany, with a load of buckshot, from the window of a house in Berlin. The emperor recovered from the wound and Nobel was hung. The Russian revolutionary societies and those in France and Germany fraternize in the International.

"By heavens! the beast has the lives of ten devils," he exclaimed angrily.

"Let us give him another volley," said one of the Nihilists, when Anderson observed:

"It is useless. He is hiding in his hole and the firing will attract notice. His presence secures us from intrusion, gentlemen. No human being would dare be round here alone, in the dark. Let the tiger be our sentry. We can form the circle. Let the queen give her orders. We are ready."

As he spoke, he little knew that, in the reeds at the foot of the tree, Hammond, the Yankee Cossack, was watching every movement.

The young aide-de camp parted the reeds and looked out.

He saw the slender form of the disguised princess ride out, and heard her say:

"Form the circle."

Instantly the horsemen formed a circle facing inward, and she continued:

"Men of Russia, are all here true in the faith? Let the Inquirer test the believers."

Hammond, intensely interested, saw General Anderson ride round to each member of the circle and hold with him a whispered colloquy, which ended by his coming to the princess and saying with a salute:

"All are in the faith, sister, and ready to obey the order of Sofia Ivanowna."

Then the princess looked round her and asked:

"Brothers, who is Sofia Ivanowna?"

"Queen of the Nihilists," they answered in a low chorus, and then she opened what seemed to the listener to be a sort of ritual of question and answer, so regularly was it delivered:

"How long shall she reign?" asked Natalie.

"Till the tyrants are dead," was the reply.

"Whence does she draw her power?"

"From the heart of the people."

"Who are the people?"

"All who are oppressed."

"Who are the Nihilists?"

"The saviors of the people."

"Why do they love them?"

"Because they are wronged."

"When will Russia be free?"

"When the people awake."

"What shall wake them?"

"The sound of the bursting bomb."

"Whom do we all obey?"

"The God who hates tyrants."

"What do tyrants deserve?"

"Death by the bursting bomb."

"Why do they deserve it?"

"Because they have offended God."

"How do they offend God?"

"By taking his place."

"What is his place?"

"Above man."

"And what is man's place?"

"Beside his brother and ready to serve him."

"It is well," said Natalie, after this short service was closed. "You are all brothers of the Faith, and it is time that we go to our business. Who has any reports?"

"I have," said Goryautchikoff. "I report that I was present at the taking of the tyrant, and that the work was well done. I report that his son, who would be another tyrant, if he dared, has shut himself up at Gatschina."

The princess waved her hand.

"That is well; but we have known it before. Who has any reports from the army?"

"I have," said a voice. "I report that in the regiment of white grenadiers there are five hundred and three converts ready to obey Sofia Ivanowna. The regiment has seven hundred and sixty men in the Petersburg battalion."

"That's well," broke in General Anderson, and then checked himself, as the princess said:

"In the circle, no comments are allowed save from the queen. Has any one a report from the Cossacks?"

"There are three converts in the Red Cossacks of the Guard," said another voice. "One is a sergeant, the others officers. The proselyte committee recommends the extermination of the Cossacks as the easiest way to save the country. We cannot convert them."

"You have heard the report of the Cossack committee," said the princess. "As many as are in favor of following its recommendation will signify it by the death-sign of the order."

Hammond watched eagerly, but saw no sign save a slight motion of the right arm; and the princess continued:

"As many as are opposed to extermination of the Cossacks will make the sign of mercy."

General Anderson raised his right hand to the sky, and said solemnly:

"I do, in the name of Sofia Ivanowna."

The princess looked at him coldly.

"And why should we show mercy?"

"Because they're good soldiers," said the old general bluntly. "If we kill them, it's true we may exterminate the tyrants; but we shall lose half the strength of Russia, too. We shall be a helpless prey to the Germans; and we can't afford to settle all our quarrels till we have beaten them."

The princess seemed to be angry.

"The brother talks like a weak man and the servant of tyranny," she said. "It is this fear of Germany that gives our tyrant half his hold upon us. The plea for mercy is too late. A vote has been taken. Who has any further reports to make?"

"I have," said another voice. "I report from the General Civil Committee."

There was a general movement of interest, and the princess said:

"The committee will report."

The Nihilist, whom Hammond recognized as Count Verevkin, an officer on the household staff, reported aloud:

"The order is in a flourishing state since the taking off of the tyrant. Three thousand circles have been established west of the Ural, and we are spreading in Siberia. The convicts especially are eager to see the day when they shall have justice instead of stripes. There are eight hundred circles in the penal settlements, and the soldiers are joining them fast. We have three factories at work in the mountains by the Chinese frontier, and two million bombs have been sent to the brothers around Petersburg and Moscow."

"Are they all in faithful hands?" asked the princess.

"They are all recorded," was the answer, "and wait the order of Sofia Ivanowna."

"It is well," said the princess. "The reports are all satisfactory. It remains to determine on the future. I report to the circle that three letters have been sent to the tyrant to warn him that he will follow his father if he does not give the people freedom. To these his reply is to shut himself up at Gatschina with his guards. He defies the Brotherhood. What is the pleasure of the Supreme Circle?"

"I move that he receive a last warning that sentence of death will be passed on him, if he does not give the people a constitution," said General Anderson.

The princess looked round.

"Is the motion seconded?"

There was no reply, but Goryautchikoff, after a pause, said:

"I move that sentence of death pass on the tyrant at once."

"Second the motion," said Verevkin. "The circle has heard," said the princess.

"All who favor sentence of death will make the death-sign."

This time Hammond found out the death-sign.

The members turned their thumbs down, in imitation of the Romans at the amphitheater, sentencing a gladiator to death, and the motion was barely perceptible unless one watched closely.

"Those opposed to the sentence will make the sign of mercy," said the princess, and General Anderson raised his open hand.

"Let the brother speak," said the princess, and he said boldly:

"I ask for mercy because I am by no means convinced the decision is wise. We are but a feeble band as you all know, and our spread depends on that of intelligence. A man must learn to read before he can read our books, and the ignorant peasantry are universally illiterate. The death of the czar at our hands—"

A murmur ran through the circle and the princess said harshly:

"The brother will remember the rules. No titles are allowed."

The general bowed.

"I apologize to the circle. The taking off of the tyrant I should have said, has not done for us all that was expected; while it has set the opinion of the poorer classes and the churches against us. In my opinion we should wait a year, and give the man a chance to show if he is as obstinate as his father. If he is, I am in favor of taking him off. That's all."

The princess looked around.

"Does any other brother wish to speak in favor of mercy?"

No reply came, and she closed the short discussion with the order:

"The tyrant Alexander III. is condemned to death. In the name of Sofia Ivanowna."

Then, after a short pause, she went on:

"Are there any further reports?"

"I have one," said Goryautchikoff. "I report that an American, called Hammond, who has been created a count by the name of Ammonoff, has lately entered the service of the tyrant, and become dangerous to the order. I suspect that he has followed us here, and may be hiding in Fort Alexis."

General Anderson interrupted.

"The brother must be mistaken. I know all that go and come here, and the Tartars would certainly have reported to me the arrival of any strangers. The brother accuses me of being careless by this report."

Goryautchikoff shrugged his shoulders.

"One cannot always tell," he said, "what goes on under one's nose. We show the tyrant that much every day. I have heard from the Cossacks in the fort that two strangers came in, the day before yesterday, and that they were suspected to be British officers in disguise. I recommend the brother to look to his Tartars. It may be our spy and his Cossack, Sirotkin."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BREAKING OF THE CIRCLE.

HAMMOND, bearing this declaration, felt his heart beating with excitement, and listened intently to hear what was coming next.

General Anderson seemed to be irritated at the imputation on his watchfulness, and said in a forcible manner:

"I will wager anything you please that no stranger can get near this fort without my knowledge. Besides, if such a thing were possible, how is it you ever allowed them to escape from Toulminka? I have heard it boasted that you were all of one mind in that place, and that every motion of the tyrant's emissaries was watched."

"So it is," returned Goryautchikoff. "We were overtaken, at Nazir Beg, by a courier to tell us that the aide-de-camp of the tyrant had left Toulminka alone, to go hunting, as it was supposed, and that his Cossack had taken a letter to the station, addressed to St. Petersburg."

There was an uneasy movement in the circle and Verevkin said:

"That is true, brother; but you must add that the letter was detained by our order till we could examine it. If it contained anything prejudicial to the brotherhood it will never reach the tyrant."

Hammond listened with interest to this conversation, and noticed that the princess took no part in it, though she seemed very attentive.

Verevkin's speech was followed by a short silence, and then Goryautchikoff said:

"I move that, if it be found this Count Ammonoff has been spying on us, he be condemned to death."

"I second the motion," said Verevkin quickly, and then they all waited on the princess, who said slowly:

"It is regularly moved that sentence of death pass on one Ammonoff, aide-de-camp to the tyrant. Are there any pleas to be made for mercy?"

Hammond noticed with surprise that she had modified her form of words to favor him, and Goryautchikoff exclaimed:

"There can be none. The man is dangerous to liberty and mercy is thrown away on him. I vote for death."

"And I."

"And I."

The responses were ardent, but to Hammond's still greater surprise the princess said:

"The brothers forget themselves. I command order in the name of Sofia Ivanowna."

Instantly there was a deep hush.

"Now," pursued the princess sharply, "I ask if there are any pleas for mercy to this man, who is doing his duty as he understands it? I ask that, in the name of Sofia Ivanowna. When I put the question for death it will be time for the brethren to answer it."

The Nihilists seemed to be surprised, but it was General Anderson who said:

"I plead for mercy for him."

"On what grounds?" asked the princess.

"On the ground that it is not best to be too sanguinary. If we kill this man without a necessity it will attract attention to the people who kill him. Moreover, I am told that there is a possibility of converting him. He is a republican in principle now, and he will end by being our friend."

The princess nodded.

"The brother has spoken well. I can give my word to the circle that this Ammonoff is a man of honor, who will not betray our secrets to his master, the tyrant."

There was another movement of surprise in the circle, and Goryautchikoff said, in a sneering way:

"I see what is the trouble. Our sister was alone on the steppe too long with this Count Ammonoff, and he has more than half converted her to the worship of our father, the czar, as the slaves call him."

Hammond quivered with anger. So the very sacrifice he had made to secure the princess's reputation was ridiculed by this man, who had pretended to be his friend, and was now calling for his death.

He watched the princess, whose back was turned to him, and saw her make an impatient, angry movement.

Then General Anderson broke in:

"The brother passes the limits of our order. We allow no suspicions cast on our queen, in whom we have full faith. I ask permission to avenge the insult on the spot."

As he spoke he drew a pistol, and Hammond, not without sympathy for the indignation which prompted the act, half rose up in excitement.

He expected to see instant bloodshed, but to his surprise Goryautchikoff backed down, saying:

"The brother misunderstood me. I had no intention of reflecting on the queen. I merely thought that the natural kindness of heart of the female sex had misled her as to the character of this man, whom I know to be a dangerous spy full of resource and boldness. That is all, on my word."

"That is different," said Anderson, coldly. "I am glad the brother has thought better of his words."

Then there was a decidedly uncomfortable silence, broken by the princess.

She spoke in a low voice, and seemed to be struggling with herself as she said:

"Brothers of the faith, this is the first time I have ever had to explain conduct of mine. I met this Count Ammonoff but a few weeks since. Goryautchikoff brought him to my house, and I have labored hard to convert him; but he is not a Russian. If he were a full member of our order, I should feel that our success was not far off. He is our foe as far as our methods are concerned. He calls our executions murders. He comes from a country where the struggle is over, and he has forgotten that in the heat of the battle many deaths are required. But he is with us for liberty, and I know that he will not betray what he has learned from me. Therefore I say it is unwise to kill him. He may be made into our friend. Are there any further pleas for mercy to be heard?"

There was a short silence, and she went on:

"Then we come to the vote. All in favor of sentence against Count Ammonoff make the death-sign of the order."

Hammond looked and saw Verevkin and Goryautchikoff, with two others, extend their arms with the thumb down.

"All who wish for mercy will make the sign of mercy," continued Natalie.

Up went seven hands, and it was with a voice that betrayed her gratification that the princess said:

"It is well. Ammonoff will be on probation. If I see any signs of treason in him, I will act on my standing authority. Is there any further business to come before the circle?"

"I move," said General Anderson, "that plenary powers be given to the Queen and Inquirer to call the next circle, and act for the interests of the order. In the name of Sofia Ivanowna."

"I second the motion," said another voice.

"And I move to amend," said Goryautchikoff, "by adding a third member to the Supreme Executive. It may happen that the Queen and Inquirer differ, and a third member may prevent a tie."

"I second the motion," said Verevkin, who seemed to be Goryautchikoff's echo.

The princess raised her hand.

"In the name of Sofia Ivanowna. All who wish a third member to the Supreme Executive, make the sign of assent."

Goryautchikoff and Verevkin nodded, but no one else stirred.

"All who are in favor of the motion as first made, signify their assent."

Nine people nodded, and she said proudly:

"In the name of Sofia Ivanowna, it is a vote. Are you ready to break the circle?"

All bowed their heads, and the princess gave three taps on her saddle-bow with the butt of a pistol, and said:

"Grand Inquirer, what is a man?"

"A brother to his fellow-men," answered Anderson slowly.

"How should he show it?" she continued.

"By setting him free," was the answer.

Then the ritual continued:

"What are his bonds?"

"Priestcraft and kingcraft."

"What is the knife to cut the first?"

"Knowledge."

"Knowledge of what?"

"Nature's laws and God's truth."

"Where do we find them?"

"In nature."

"How shall we cut the bonds of kingcraft?"

"By waking the nation."

"How shall we wake the nation?"

"By the sound of the bursting bomb."

The princess turned her head.

"Grand Proselyte, what is the army?"

Goryautchikoff answered sullenly:

"The servant of the tyrant."

"When the tyrant dies, what of the army?"

"It dies too."

"What is the true army?"

"The people in arms."

"When shall we have that?"

"When Russia awakes."

"Grand Artificer," she continued, "when do tyrants deserve death?"

It was Verevkin who answered:

"When they disobey Sofia Ivanowna."

"Why?"

"Because she speaks with the voice of all Russia."

"Where is her throne?"

"In the hearts of the faithful."

"Who are her subjects?"

"She has none."

"What is her mission?"

"To destroy priestcraft and kingcraft."

"When will it end?"

"When Russia is free."

"It is well."

She gave another rap and said:

"Attention to the breaking."

All removed their hats and the princess addressed a short petition to the God of freedom to aid them in their cause, then resumed her hat and said:

"In the name of Sofia Ivanowna, break the circle. Amen."

All resumed their hats and rode away in silence toward the fort.

When the last hoof-beat had died away, the concealed aide-de-camp called out in a guarded tone:

"Sirotkin, are you there?"

"Yes, most high-born," said a voice from the tree, "and almost smothered with this dead carcass. Ouf! what a stupid lot of fools they are! Thought I should go to sleep with their mummery. But if they had known who was here, they might not have kept it up so long. Take care! Here he goes."

With that there was a rustling in the foliage, followed by the thud of a heavy fall, and Sirotkin followed the dead tiger down the tree, observing as he got to the bottom:

"He's pretty well riddled, most high-born, but he made a good shield. Holy St. Vladimir and Ivan! How I scared them!"

And he laughed at the recollection.

Hammond seemed to be in a thoughtful mood, for he remained standing at the foot of the tree on the little knoll looking at the water, till Sirotkin ventured to say:

"If we are to pass to Toulminka, it is time we were away, most high-born."

Then the Yankee Cossack roused himself and astonished Sirotkin by saying:

"I am not going to Toulminka. I am going to Fort Alexis at once, or rather, as soon as day dawns."

CHAPTER XX.

THE ARREST.

SIROTKIN was too well trained to make any comment on his master's sudden change of mind, so he contented himself with:

"Your nobility knows best. Shall I tell them we shall not want the horses?"

"I will do that myself. Come, let us find Sultan Esa."

They waded through the shallow pools to the steppe, where they soon came in sight of a dark group of men and horses, and were hailed in Russian with:

"*Vui kto?*" [who are you?]

Hammond recognized the voice of his friend, Sultan Esa, and answered it.

Then he went up and found that the indefatigable Kirghis had already got ready the horses for riding past, and Esa told him that he had secured relays at every aoul on the way to Toulminka.

"Already!" echoed Hammond. "But how do you know? There has been no time to go to Toulminka and back."

Sultan Esa laughed.

"We have lighted the signal fires and shot the arrows," he said, "and they all know what that means in the steppe. The answer has come already."

Then he explained to Hammond that the Nomads of the Kirghis steppe are all of the same family in one district, keeping up the records of kinship to the fiftieth or sixtieth generation and that on rare occasions, when it is a family matter that a message should be sent, they have a way of signaling each other a long way off at night, by shooting burning arrows up in the air at certain intervals.

On the flat steppe a fire on the ground is only visible seven or eight miles, but by shooting an arrow up, with a ball of flaming tow on the point, the distance of signaling becomes twenty or thirty miles.

And every Kirghis who sees the blazing arrow is bound to answer it and send on the signal, so that in an hour or less a distance of four hundred miles can be traversed by these rude signals.

They are very simple, as becomes the needs of the simple Kirghis.

A single arrow means "I wish to speak to you," and the answer is the same.

The chain established, it becomes a question of the number of arrows sent up at a time, and the code is brief.

Two arrows mean: "Danger; flee to the open steppe, away from the tracks."

Three arrows mean: "Prepare relays. A message is coming."

Four arrows mean: "Russians are coming for taxes. Bury your gold."

And so forth, up to nine at a time, very rarely used, the summons to war.

"Well," said Hammond, when this had been explained to him, "can you keep these horses waiting till daylight? I am going to Fort Alexis first, and may need all my heels after I come away."

"Your nobility knows best," replied Esa, hesitatingly, "but if you enter Fort Alexis you will be very apt never to get out again."

Hammond was struck with the homely reasoning of the Tartar, but he had made up his mind, since his discovery of the way in which the princess and General Anderson had fought for him in the secret council of the Nihilists, on a bold stroke.

"I know my danger," he said to Esa; "but you don't know my power yet. I wish you to signal again that we will have a party of six people, instead of four, to ride to Toulminka, and that we shall start to-morrow. If I don't return to this place to-morrow, you can conclude I am killed. In that case, spread the news throughout the steppe that war has begun, and that the czar's officer has been murdered by traitors."

"Your nobility can depend upon it that we shall have fine times in that case," said Sultan Esa, rubbing his hands.

"For to-night," pursued the Yankee Cossack, "we will go to Bautoo's aoul. In the morning I will present myself at Alexis."

Sultan Esa seemed to be well satisfied with the decision, and they rode over to Bautoo's camp, which they entered about midnight, first sending forward Esa to avoid an alarm which might reach the garrison of Fort Alexis, and tell them strangers had come.

Next morning early, Hammond arrayed himself in his undress uniform, looked to his pistols carefully,

and, accompanied by Sirotkin, rode boldly up to the gate of Fort Alexis, just as reveille roll-call was over. He knew that Russian officers are not apt to be very punctilious in their duties, save so far as they are compelled, and he felt sure that his Nihilist friends would sleep late. He was received with every mark of surprise and respect by the Cossack lieutenant, who recognized his undress uniform as that of a colonel.

"Is General Anderson up yet?" asked Hammond, abruptly.

Lieutenant Boriskin saluted.

"The commandant receives reports in his room, my colonel, but he goes to sleep after that till guard-mounting."

"Send a sergeant at once to announce to him Colonel Count Ammonoff, aide-de-camp to the czar," said the Yankee Cossack, imperiously, and Boriskin bowed low and did as he was ordered.

"Follow me, Sirotkin," said Hammond, in a low tone, "and keep your pistols ready. We may want to use them."

Both men had pistols in their belts, and Sirotkin carried a Winchester rifle belonging to Hammond; but both had left their swords behind at Toulminka.

Hammond wore the simple undress of a Cossack officer, with colonel's braid on his sleeves, but there was nothing to show his aide-camp's rank save the authority of his pocket, and it struck him that, in case of trouble, it might be as well to know how he stood with the Cossacks.

He turned to Boriskin, saying:

"Lieutenant, are all here faithful to his majesty, our father czar?"

Boriskin drew himself up stiffly.

"The Cossacks of Turkistan have never yet been found unfaithful, my colonel," he said; "and had any one but an officer asked the question, I should have replied with a blow."

Hammond smiled.

"It is well. Another question. Do you or not recognize me as aide-de-camp to his majesty?"

Boriskin scratched his head.

"I could not say as to that. I have not seen any orders."

Hammond pulled out his order.

"Read that. What does it say?"

Boriskin looked at the paper.

"It is an order from his majesty, giving to Colonel Count Ammonoff full powers to take command at any place where the commanding officer does not take his orders direct from the minister of war."

"And here is my commission, to show you that I am Colonel Count Ammonoff. Do you refuse to obey my orders or not?"

Boriskin saluted respectfully.

"Certainly not. I am at your disposal."

"Then sound the alarm and turn out the garrison on parade in front of the general's window at once," said Ammonoff. "Here, give me a pen and paper. I appoint you acting adjutant of the post. If you succeed, I will see that you are promoted to captain. There is a plot on foot, and the fidelity of the Cossacks is suspected. What has become of the strangers who came here yesterday?"

Boriskin, who had turned pale at the exciting news, stammered:

"Strangers? They have gone, colonel."

Hammond started.

"Gone! Where? When?"

"At an hour after midnight. They came here by post, and have gone back. The general saw them off."

Hammond was amazed by the news. He had expected to arrest the whole party, and they had given him the slip already.

"Never mind," he said, after a moment's reflection; "turn out the garrison, as I said, and send the sergeant with me to rouse the general."

Boriskin, who looked completely bewildered at everything he heard and saw, went off to obey, and the sergeant, a stout fellow with a shrewd look, came and reported, saluting:

"I am at your nobility's orders, most high-born."

"Lead the way to General Anderson," said Ammonoff, and, five minutes later, he was at the door of the general's room, to find him fast asleep, while the trumpets were sounding the alarm outside and the Cossacks were mustering on the parade. Hammond turned at the door and said to the sergeant:

"Remove the sentry. My Cossack will stand guard. Send all the men to their companies at once."

The sergeant saluted and went off, as the Yankee Cossack closed the door and went to General Anderson's bedside.

He had a hard duty to perform, and one which he felt reluctant to do. He had to arrest a man whom he rather liked, and who had displayed many generous traits in his behavior, the night before.

The general was a very handsome man about sixty, white-bearded, with a silvery moustache, and he looked very venerable as he lay asleep.

Ammonoff took a seat by his bedside, drew and cocked a pistol, then shook Anderson by the shoulder and said:

"General Anderson, I arrest you in the name of the czar."

Instantly the old man woke with a start, and his right hand went under his pillow as Ammonoff had expected.

He relinquished his purpose as the muzzle of the Yankee Cossack's pistol looked him in the eye, and Ammonoff said:

"It is useless, general. My weapon is cocked and pointed. Take away your hand."

The general, without a word, withdrew his hand, and Ammonoff calmly took from under the pillow the other pistol, when Anderson in a low voice said:

"Who are you?"

"I am Colonel Count Ammonoff, aide-de-camp to the czar, with authority to take command here," said Ammonoff quietly. "I arrest you for complicity in Nihilist plots. If you attempt resistance, I must shoot you."

For a few moments there was a dead silence in the room, and then the general said in a constrained manner:

"You are a bold man, Count Ammonoff. I have heard of you before. But you can prove nothing against me. This suspicion of every one is ridiculous. I a Nihilist! I have been thirty years in his majesty's service, and no one can point to a word or deed of mine that is wrong."

"I did not come here to dispute with you, gen-

eral," replied the Yankee Cossack quietly. "I have arrested you for treason. You can secure your release in one way alone."

"And what is that?" asked Anderson.

"You say you are innocent. Where are the Nihilists who were with you yesterday? They have gone away. Arrest them, and you shall be free."

CHAPTER XXI.

CHECK!

It cost Hammond some effort to say this; for it seemed like asking the general to betray his comrades.

To his surprise Anderson answered:

"Nihilists? There are none here, and have been none. There was a party of my friends visited me on a trip to see hawking on the steppe."

"What were their names?" asked Ammonoff.

The general to his still greater surprise, gave them all truly as he knew them, adding:

"If you wish them to be sent for I will do it at once."

The Yankee Cossack hardly knew what to make of this suspicious readiness to send for the people he knew to be Nihilists.

Only one name had Anderson concealed, and that was Princess Natalie's. He had called her "Count Koulikoff."

Hammond considered a little and answered:

"I am willing to trust you on your parole not to attempt to escape. Where are these your friends, and how long will it take to get them?"

Anderson reflected a moment.

"I can send a telegram to Fort Paulovsky, the next in the chain, ordering them back, and they can be here by to-morrow."

"Write out the telegram at once."

Anderson looked at him with a slight frown as he said:

"Your tone is peremptory, sir. I tell you I am a good subject of his majesty. I don't write in bed. Give me time to get up."

"On the contrary, general, you must write in bed," said Ammonoff, sharply.

At this moment the trumpet blew the signal for opening ranks outside, and Anderson called out, angrily:

"What does this mean? Who has dared to order out the troops?"

"I have, general."

"You?"

"Yes, I; by virtue of my orders. If you wish to make a scene, say the word, and I'll throw open the window, tell the Cossacks who I am, and put the next officer in command, while I take you to St. Petersburg under guard."

The old general glared at him a moment as if he would like to annihilate him, and then controlled his passion, saying:

"Do as you will. I defy you."

He threw himself back on his pillow, and Hammond was puzzled what to do.

After a moment's consideration, he said:

"Very well, general. You leave me no sort of alternative. Who is your next officer?"

"Colonel Ivanoff," said Anderson, gruffly.

"Then I shall put Colonel Ivanoff in command, and send you on under guard," said Hammond, coldly, rising. "Good-day."

He was about to leave the room, when Anderson called out:

"Stop a moment. Suppose I send for my friends, will you guarantee they come to no harm through you? What do you want with them?"

"A little quiet conversation, general, that is all. I can promise safety to all but two."

"And who are they?"

"Goryautchikoff and Verevkin."

"Why do you except them?"

Because they are on the household staff and I suspect them of complicity in the death of his late majesty."

The general burst into a bitter laugh.

"Never tired of bloodshed? Why, you have already hung four men for that."

"The men who threw the bombs. Yes. But not the men who instigated them, and who led the escort into the street where they knew the assassins were waiting."

Anderson bit his lip.

"You'll find it difficult to prove that against men of family and position."

"That is my business, general. For the last time will you recall your friends?"

"Yes," said the general, sullenly. "Mind, when all this is over, I'll have satisfaction for the insult you have put on me."

"As you please, general. Have I your parole to do as you have consented?"

Anderson hesitated and Hammond watched him closely. At last the general said:

"I give my parole to send for my friends and not to escape, if you, on your part, promise not to tell my men I am under surveillance. I do not wish to be needlessly humiliated before them."

"I promise that, general."

"Then my parole is yours."

Hammond bowed formally.

"I will dismiss the garrison as soon as I am dressed," pursued Anderson. "You'll permit me to do that, I suppose?"

"Certainly, general."

"Then oblige me by retiring while I dress," said the old general. "You'll find brandy and cigars in my office down-stairs. Make yourself at home there."

His face was clear and smiling again, and Hammond went away to the office down-stairs, from the window of which he saw the whole garrison drawn up, waiting.

Parade at six in the morning, with a ten-minute wait for the commanding officer, is a trial of equanimity, even to a Russian soldier, when he has not had breakfast.

Very soon, however, General Anderson came down-stairs, and entered the office, with a cold nod to Ammonoff saying:

"If you will come with me now, I will show you what I am going to do."

The Yankee Cossack followed him outside, and the general took his position in front of the center of the line, which presented arms. Then Lieutenant Boriskin rode out as the adjutant, saluted the general and said:

"General, the line awaits your orders."

Anderson stared at him.

"What do you mean? Who are you? You are not my adjutant."

Boriskin saluted stiffly.

"I am your adjutant by the order of his majesty, the czar, communicated to me by that officer, who is his aide-de-camp."

The general turned white as a sheet and his eyes glowed as he turned to Hammond, murmuring softly:

"You are a very bold man, sir."

Then to Boriskin he said:

"Go back to your guard. I command this fort, and no one supersedes me. The officers will dismiss the parade. Captain Fedoroff of the sharpshooters will march his company here in front of my office, to report for duty to me."

Ammonoff came close behind him and said in a low tone:

"Take care. If I see symptoms of treason, by heavens I'll shoot you down in front of your men."

Anderson turned and regarded him with a cold sneering smile he had not hitherto shown, as he answered:

"My dear Count Ammonoff, I am only going to send my telegram."

Then he watched the break-up of the parade, while Boriskin, after glancing at Hammond as if to ask for orders and getting none, fell back, thoroughly crestfallen, and Fedoroff, a handsome Circassian officer, led up his sharpshooters and brought them to an "order arms" in front of the general.

Then General Anderson said to Ammonoff:

"Monsieur, I am about to send my telegram, but before I do so, I request that you will give up your arms to me."

Hammond had been suspecting some trick, from the sudden change in Anderson's tone and manner; but he was not to be so easily outwitted, so he turned to Captain Fedoroff, asking him:

"By whose orders was this parade called?"

"Are you going to give up your arms or not?" interrupted Anderson sharply, and Hammond heard the click of a pistol-lock.

He turned his head to see that Anderson had drawn another pistol; but he also saw, behind the general and unseen by him Sirotkin, in the door of the office, with his Winchester rifle leveled.

"General Anderson," he said quietly, "before you proceed to extreme measures look behind you."

The general turned and saw Sirotkin, while Hammond continued to Fedoroff:

"I have taken command of this post, by orders of his majesty. General Anderson is no longer in chief command. He is now about to send a telegram. Wait till we come out of the office."

Then, without touching his weapons he went and ran his arm through that of the general, who still stood irresolute.

"Come, general," he said, "it is time we sent that telegram."

The old Swede ground his teeth. He saw that the news had spread over the garrison. All the officers saw something was wrong, and even Fedoroff hesitated to obey him.

He went into the office without another word, and called out harshly:

"Where's Petroff?"

A soldier entered instantly, and to him the general dictated the following telegram:

"To COLONEL BARON STEPANOFF, Paulovsky:—"

"Send back the party of tourists to Alexis, if they have not already gone on. If they have, telegraph that they are wanted here. ANDERSON, General."

"Is that sufficient?" he asked sullenly.

Ammonoff bowed as the clicking of the instrument finished.

"That will do, if they come. If they do not so much the worse for them."

Then he went out to Fedoroff.

"Keep your company under arms," he said, "and be ready for instant duty. Take orders only from me or Lieutenant Boriskin, who is acting adjutant. March your men to their barracks."

Fedoroff hesitated.

"You will excuse me, colonel," he said, "but I am in doubt whom to obey here. General Anderson is my commandant and I have heard no order read on parade, providing for a change of command."

Ammonoff turned to Anderson.

"Will you give the order?" he asked. "or shall I call the parade again and read it to the troops?"

Anderson bit his lips.

"You can obey this gentleman, Fedoroff," he said. "He has orders to supersede me, and I am not one to disobey positive orders."

Fedoroff saluted Ammonoff.

"I am at your orders, colonel," he said, and then he marched his men to the barrack.

Hammond beckoned to Boriskin, whom he saw standing as if bewildered staring about him.

The officer came up instantly, and Hammond said to him:

"You'll take up your quarters in the office with me to-day. The general is relieved from duty for the present."

Then to Anderson in a whisper:

"Do you wish a sentry put over you, or will you remain in your quarters on your parole not to leave them?"

The general curled his lip.

"As you please," he said. "Put a sentry on if you like; already you have disgraced me before my men. Publish it that I am under arrest, if you like. I am going to my room."

He went off up-stairs, and Hammond made a sign to the sharp and faithful Sirotkin, who immediately followed Anderson.

When they had disappeared Hammond spoke to Petroff, the telegraph operator.

"Telegraph at once to the next station to open the way to St. Petersburg office of the minister of war. I wish to speak to him at once."

Petroff stared, hesitated, and said:

"We cannot send direct to St. Petersburg, most high-born. The line ends at Fort Palatsky."

"Then how do you telegraph for orders if you need them?"

"We never do, most high-born."

"To whom do you report then?"

"To General Tchernayeff, at Tashkent."

"Is there no way to send to St. Petersburg?"
 "Certainly, most high-born, but only by a courier to Orenburg. From thence there is a line straight to the capital."

Hammond considered a moment.
 "Telegraph to Paulovsky, then."
 "Yes, most high-born."
 "Ask for an answer to the last message."
 Petroff began clicking away, and presently said to Hammond:

"He's going to answer."
 A great clicking ensued, and Petroff read slowly off the register:

"The party changed horses here half an hour ago, and have gone on to Niak."

"Telegraph to Niak then at once."
 Petroff rung a bell, and after a great deal of clicking and ringing, said:

"We are on Niak, most high-born. What shall I say?"

"Ask if a party of ten people, riding post, have arrived there yet from Paulovsky."

Petroff sent the message, and reported:
 "He says no."

"Tell him to arrest them as soon as they reach there, and hold them till further orders."

Petroff sent the message and listened to the reply, which he translated:

"The commandant wishes to know who gives the order. He ranks General Anderson."

"Tell him Colonel Count Ammonoff, aide-de-camp to his majesty the czar."

Petroff clicked off the message, and very soon the reply came back:

"Colonel Count Ammonoff can go to the devil. There's no such name in the order announcing the aides."

The moment this message came forth, Petroff began to look suspicious, and Boriskin still more so. Hammond saw that it was necessary to do something to restore confidence in his claims to authority; but he was puzzled and staggered at the reply.

It seemed that the emperor or the minister of war had omitted his name from the printed list of aides-de-camp, and the commander of Niak looked on him as an impostor.

Presently the clicking was renewed, and Petroff read out:

"Where's General Anderson? Tell him to come to the instrument at once."

"Tell him," said Ammonoff, hurriedly, "that Anderson is here."

Petroff looked up at him in a peculiar way, and began to click away at an amazing rate.

Presently the clicking was answered, and the operator listened intently.

Instead of speaking, he began to write down the message, and when it was finished he handed it to Ammonoff.

The message said:

"General Anderson is hereby directed to arrest the impostor calling himself Count Ammonoff, and send him to Niak under guard."

"Colocheff, General."

Hammond compressed his lips. Here was a checkmate to all his plans.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RIDE TO TOULMINKA.

FOR one moment he thought of continuing the conversation and trying to impress on the choleric Colocheff, through the telegraph, the character of his authority.

But he saw plainly, from the countenances of both Petroff and Boriskin, that they were hesitating whether or not to obey him. His resolution was taken with characteristic rapidity and decision.

Turning to Petroff, he said:

"Answer the general that, if he will take the responsibility of arresting me, I hope he will at once telegraph his action to the minister of war. Ask him to answer."

Petroff seemed relieved by the message, and sent it off.

An answer was instantly returned:

"Have already done so. Send him on under guard at once." "Colocheff."

Then, with a bitter sense of disappointment, Hammond turned to the staircase and called Sirotkin down.

"You are released from duty," he said to the bewildered Boriskin. "You have done what you could, and I will see that you are held harmless for it. General Colocheff has made a mistake he will rue to the end of his life, when it is too late. You can arrest me, if you wish."

"But I have no authority," said Boriskin, still more bewildered. "I must ask the general first."

He went off up-stairs, and Sirotkin said to his master, in a low tone:

"The horses are outside, most high-born."

Hammond started and looked out of the window, where stood the horses on which they had come to Alexis.

Suddenly it flashed through his mind that he was a fool to allow himself to be arrested. Knowing, as he did, the desperate straits of the Nihilists, he doubted whether Anderson would not seize and destroy his papers and kill him at once.

Already he heard loud voices overhead, and the general was scolding vigorously at the unhappy Boriskin.

"Come," he said to Sirotkin, "we have failed, I see, for the present. Let us go to St. Petersburg."

Petroff started up to cry out:

"Halt, most high-born. My duty forbids—"

"Your duty be hanged," interrupted Sirotkin, rudely striding past him. "I'll shoot you if you say a word."

They passed rapidly out and mounted the horses with no marked haste; then went out of the parade-ground as if for a ride, at an easy pace, to avoid any suspicions that the tables had turned.

The garrison was still in confusion, the men and officers conversing eagerly, and no one stopped them till they got to the gate, when they heard Anderson shouting:

"Arrest those men!"

"Spur hard!" cried Ammonoff, and away they

flew into the open steppe, unharmed, till they had gone about two hundred yards, when they heard the sound of shots and the bullets began to knock up the dirt all round them.

"Here they come!" said Sirotkin, and looking back, they saw a score of Cossacks, with Boriskin at the head, coming after them on the spur, firing as they came.

But firing from galloping horses at others going full speed is uncertain work, and Hammond and Sirotkin used their spurs so well that they began to near the shallow swamp a quarter of a mile ahead of the Cossacks.

On the other side they saw on the steppe the dark group of horses that told where Sultan Esa was waiting for them, true to his word.

There were nearly fifty horses in the group, ready for the party of six that Hammond had promised, and as soon as the Tartars saw the state of affairs they rode down to the edge of the swamp to help their friends.

Hammond and Sirotkin dashed in, but found their progress so seriously impeded by the depth of the water and the mud that they were unable to get out of gunshot before the Cossacks got to the water.

Then they turned and emptied their revolvers to the rear, pressing on all the time, till Hammond had his cap knocked off by a bullet, his clothing shot full of holes, and found the blood running down his fingers from a slight wound in the arm before he got to firm ground on the other side.

Once there, he called to Sultan Esa:

"To horse! Traitors to the czar are in the fort! The Nihilists are abroad."

Sultan Esa did not seem to understand who the Nihilists were, but he knew Ammonoff's uniform and that sufficed him.

Five minutes later the mob of horses were flying away like the wind toward the west, and within half an hour they had dropped the Cossacks out of sight on the steppe.

Then Hammond began to think on his future plan of operations, of which he had no very clear notion as yet.

Only one thing remained for him to do now—that was to reach Toulminka as soon as possible and telegraph to General Milutine. He had entered Alexis feeling kindly toward General Anderson; now he had come to the conclusion that the general was as bad as all the rest of them, and deserved no mercy.

Only one soft spot was left in his heart, and that was for Natalie.

No one knew that he had been watching the supreme circle of the Nihilists, and he knew from past experience that the decree of the circle would find plenty of willing agents for its execution.

Could he save the czar's life and that of Natalie also?

Undecided what to do, he rode on at the break-neck speed of the Tartar post, till he forgot everything but the sense of motion and a desire to get to his journey's end.

Sultan Esa kept the lead, and they rode steadily at fifteen or sixteen miles an hour, till the horses, spite of all the changing they could give them, began to flag, and the camp of the next sultan was reached.

Here fresh horses were waiting, and the mad race was resumed, to be kept up all the long night and next day, with shorter stages, till on the afternoon of the next day, Hammond and Sirotkin, haggard and ready to drop with fatigue, sighted the Castle of Toulminka, and saw floating over it the flag with the Koulikoff arms, which showed that the mistress of the mansion had arrived before them.

The aide-de-camp was so nearly dead with want of sleep that he did not appreciate the strangeness of the thing; but when Sirotkin called his attention to it he said:

"It is impossible; it is a trick! She cannot be there. We have come three hundred miles in thirty-six hours, and it was fifty miles further by their round."

"Your nobility, then, will enter the castle?" said Sirotkin, inquiringly.

"Yes, yes," was irritable reply. "I tell you she cannot be there."

They rode up to the castle gate, and Count Ammonoff gave Sultan Esa a bag of twenty-rouble pieces.

"There," he said, "that for your horses; but for your fidelity nothing can repay you. I will remember you at the palace."

Sultan Esa looked a little tired himself, but far from being as much exhausted as the officer, and he laughed as he turned his horse's head back to the steppe.

"When next your nobility comes to the steppe to ride Tartar-fashion," he said, "tell every one that Sultan Esa never found a Russian who rode so well."

Then he departed, and Hammond rode into the court with Sirotkin to meet the gay greeting of Goryautchikoff, who came smiling up with outstretched hand to say to him:

"Why, dear Ammonoff, where have you been all this time? We came in this morning from Orenburg and the people said you had gone on a hunt. Did you find anything?"

Hammond was tempted to smite him in the face, but he managed to say calmly:

"I had a desire to taste Tartar life and I have been riding post for fun. Is the princess here too?"

"Of course. We all came in early, but she is tired, I understand."

"So am I," said Hammond briefly. "I'm going to bed till I get over it."

He went past Goryautchikoff without further notice, and as soon as he got to his room pulled all the heavy furniture up against the door to prevent intrusion, and then threw himself on the floor with Sirotkin, to be asleep in two minutes.

When Hammond woke again it was night, but the castle was ablaze with lights and the sound of music showed that a festival was going on.

No one seemed to have disturbed them, for the furniture barricade remained against the door and Sirotkin lay on top of it still snoring.

Hammond rubbed his eyes, and it was some moments before he could collect his thoughts.

Then he began to wonder what was the occasion of the festivity in the castle, and soon became aware of the sound of a chorus of male voices, which he knew came from the old banquet hall

on the opposite side of the court from his room. He rose and went to the window to look down. The large court of the castle was dotted with servants hurrying to and fro with dishes.

A banquet was going on.

Hammond felt that his own frame was still stiff from fatigue, and he was hungry and thirsty. Why should he not go to the banquet? He was still ostensibly a guest of the princess and uncertain whether the gay party below knew where he had been or not. He reasoned with himself that Anderson was not likely to have trusted any secrets to the telegraph, and therefore it was possible that no one knew what he had done.

Yet Goryautchikoff had said in the secret circle that he suspected Ammonoff of being near them.

And how had they managed to get to Toulminka ahead of him, apparently fresh and unfatigued?

Goryautchikoff had said they had come from Orenburg, but Goryautchikoff was such a liar one could hardly believe him.

Then he remembered that the railroad from Toulminka ran to Orenburg and said to himself:

"Perhaps he told the truth after all. It is only a hundred and fifty miles north from Alexis to Orenburg, and they may have taken a special train from there."

As he was revolving these thoughts he heard a portentous yawn, and Sirotkin began to stretch himself and roll over, forgetting that he was lying on the top of a big bureau, and in consequence tumbling off with a crash that woke him up thoroughly, after which he rose and said:

"No one seems to have come to see us in the night, most high-born, but they tried the door twice, and I got up there to sleep, for fear they would come while we were not able to hear them for fatigue."

"You did right, Sirotkin. Come to the window and tell me what you think of all this."

Sirotkin obeyed, and they looked down in silence, till the Cossack observed wistfully:

"It looks, and sounds, and smells, like supper, most high-born, and I am hungry. I don't see why we should not go down. It would give them all a surprise, and show them that the game is by no means over."

"Just what I was thinking of, Sirotkin. It might force them to show their hands. Let us dress ourselves and go down."

Everything at Toulminka was on a luxurious scale, and Hammond's rooms were fit for a prince, with bath-room attached in civilized style, so that, in a short time, he and his follower had refreshed themselves from the fatigues of the journey, and felt ready for action.

Hammond shaved himself carefully, and put on his full-dress uniform, took all his valuables in his pockets, put on his arms, which he covered with a cloak, and then sallied out with Sirotkin.

They found their part of the house dark and deserted, as if every one was at the banquet, and Hammond was going across the court when the Cossack said softly:

"Is your nobility prepared for another failure, like we had at Alexis?"

Hammond turned his head quickly, for the question surprised him.

"What do you mean? I am simply going in to supper with my hostess and the rest of her guests."

Sirotkin gave a short sniff.

"As your nobility pleases."

"But what do you mean?" asked Hammond, who had, before, found it wise to heed the counsels of his follower.

"I mean, most high-born, that you are going into a wolf's den, and it may be as well to have horses in case the wolves prove too much for us."

The suggestion was a good one, for the aide-de-camp was not quite sure of the sort of reception he should meet with at the banquet-table.

"Can you get the horses, think you?" he said to Sirotkin, and the Cossack gave a short laugh.

"Trust a Cossack to steal a horse," he said. "If your nobility has to run, jump out of the window on the other side of the hall. It opens on the steppe toward the railroad, and we can reach there in half an hour."

"By the by," suggested Hammond, "there is a train to St. Petersburg at midnight, and we may be in time to catch it. I've half a mind to go there now."

"It would be the safest plan, most high-born," said Sirotkin, eagerly. "It is no use trying to talk reason to these Nihilist fools. We heard enough of their nonsense at Alexis."

Hammond hesitated. They still stood in the deserted part of the house, and departure was easy, but at that moment he caught sight through the open windows of the banquet-hall, of the beautiful head of the princess. In a moment all his prudence seemed to flee to the winds, and he said to Sirotkin hurriedly:

"Go get the horses and wait for me. I must go in yonder."

As he crossed the court he muttered:

"To save the woman I love, if I can."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BANQUET HALL.

WHEN Hammond crossed the court he noticed that all the servants stared at him as if he had been a ghost; but he paid no attention to them, and entered the banquet hall by a side door.

The room was large and lofty, and crowded with people, at two tables.

At the upper one were Princess Natalie and her guests, to the number of eleven, including the dark Baroness Baulkin, who sat next to her hostess; and an empty chair stood at the princess's left hand.

At the lower table were seated nearly two hundred men and women, apparently peasants, and Hammond realized that some festival was being celebrated.

As he entered the room, Goryautchikoff was on his feet, speaking, holding up a glass of champagne; and Hammond caught his last words:

"Pledge me then a health to our lovely princess, mother and sister to all her people. Long may she live, with many more birthdays, and may we all see the day when Russia shall live peacefully under the love of Sofia Ivanowna."

In an instant all were on their feet shouting:

"A health, a health, a health! To Natalie the Good, and Sofia Ivanowna!"

Hammond, unnoticed in the crowd, made his way

to the side of the princess, during the shouting, and whispered in her ear:

"Do not let me disturb your festivities; but I have come to take my leave."

She started when his voice came to her ear and looked up at him, very pale. Then she forced a smile, saying:

"But I can not permit it on my birthday. See, I have kept a place for you."

She pointed to the empty chair, but he shook his head with the dry remark:

"I thank you, but we should be thirteen then and you know the superstition. One of us might die this year and I wish no deaths on my account."

He had been looking at her as he spoke, but as he turned his head away, became aware that all eyes were on him, and Goryautchikoff called out gayly:

"It is the weary hunter returned to take his seat and defy superstition. Gentlemen, Count Ammonoff, not having found what he sought, has come back to find what he did not seek."

His tone had a hidden sarcasm in it that Hammond well understood; so he answered:

"The gracious princess and all of you will pardon me, I am sure; but I have just received orders to return to St. Petersburg, and I have come to take my leave."

The news seemed to produce surprise and not a little confusion at the table, for people began to whisper to each other, all looking decidedly uneasy save Natalie.

Presently Goryautchikoff, who had been eying him in a singular meaning way, asked:

"Did you have success in your hunt?"

"I found what I went for," returned Hammond, calmly. "I had my eyes opened to a good deal."

He wanted to learn how much the Nihilists knew of his movements, and Goryautchikoff fell into the trap, asking:

"Why, where did you go?"

"To Fort Alexis, to join a grand hawking-match. Have you ever seen an eagle used to kill wolves, Goryautchikoff?"

"No," returned the Russian with affected indifference. "I take no interest in such things beyond the bustle and motion. I supposed you had not gone further than the nearest aoul. But come, it is dry work talking. I have a toast to propose. Fill your glasses all."

Hammond saw, from the look of his eye, that something was wrong, and he wanted to see how far the Russian would go in the midst of his friends.

All filled their glasses and Goryautchikoff rose to say:

"The health of the gentleman who put his head in the lion's mouth. He has plenty of courage, but little discretion. I drink to you, Count Ammonoff."

Ammonoff looked round the room as Goryautchikoff spoke, and saw that all eyes were fixed on himself, as if anticipating an explosion.

He glanced at the princess and she was deadly pale, as if frightened.

As soon as the toast had been drank the Yankee Cossack filled his glass and said:

"I, too, have a toast to propose. I drink to the man who is not afraid to tame the lion. He knows, when he puts his head in its mouth, that the beast will not bite. I drink to his majesty, Alexander Alexandrovitch, Czar of all the Russias."

He gave the toast on purpose to make every one present declare himself, and, as he looked round the table, saw that the device had succeeded.

Every one sat back in his chair, and the very peasants at the lower tables looked up and sneered openly at Ammonoff. He looked round the table, glass in hand, and then turned to the princess.

"Will you not drink a health to his majesty, princess?" he asked, amid a dead silence. "I am going to St. Petersburg at once, and I wish to report that the misress of Toulminka is loyal to the czar, for whom her husband fell on the field."

The hush became intense now, as every one watched the princess, who was ghastly pale. She slowly lifted her glass and touched it to her lips, when Hammond smiled.

"It is well," he said, bowing. "I wish to be able to report to his majesty what I have seen. Count Goryautchikoff, Baron Verevkin, you belong to the household. Do you refuse to drink to the czar?"

Goryautchikoff lifted up his glass.

"Certainly not," said he, boldly. "I drink to his courage. May he mount higher than his father did. There!"

He tossed off his glass, and a coarse laugh echoed round the table, while Verevkin cried:

"Drink to the czar, gentlemen. It costs nothing. To the hermit of Gatchina, and may we be there to see his coronation."

Another laugh echoed all round the hall this time, even the peasants taking it up, so that Ammonoff was astonished by their boldness.

"Baron Boulkin, a stupid-looking man with a bulldog's face, who was known as the best shot and most hen-pecked husband at court, blurted out:

"Aha! Good! Good! His coronation! He dare not get crowned. Sofia Ivanowna will send him to heaven quicker than she did his father."

Ammonoff listened, and felt his heart beating rapidly. The boldness of these people boded danger to him, and he knew it; but he had come there to find out the worst, and had made up his mind to try the effect of "bluffing," in poker parlance.

He looked round the table and hitched up his belt, as he said, quietly:

"I've a few words to say here. Will you listen to them?"

As he finished he glanced at the princess, and noticed a certain haggard look in her eyes, as if she feared something that he did not understand. He even thought he detected a signal in her eyes.

"We'll listen," said Boulkin, who seemed to be more than half-drunk. "It's always polite to listen to a man's last words, when he's going to be executed."

Hammond curled his lip.

"Assassinated, you mean," he said, with disdain. "Well, as you will. You, Baron Boulkin have just said that the czar dare not get crowned. Now I tell you that not only will he be crowned within a year, but that you shall see it, and all of you gentlemen shall be present at the coronation, which will take place in the Cathedral of Moscow."

Boulkin laughed discordantly, but Hammond pursued:

"Only two members of this party will not be there."

"And who are they?" asked Boulkin.

"Count Goryautchikoff and Baron Verevkin," replied Hammond quietly.

Both gentlemen started up at once with frowning brows, and Verevkin cried:

"What do you mean? A truce to this fencing of words. We know each other now, and you have tried to spy on us. Do you suppose you will be allowed to go to St. Petersburg?"

"Certainly," said Hammond, unconsciously drawing closer to the princess, in his excitement. "I am the guest of your queen, and to lay hands on me is to profane the rites of hospitality."

He looked down at the princess, and saw that she was gazing at him with a strange look, half of fear, half of admiration.

With a great effort she said:

"Gentlemen, the count is right. My house must not be insulted."

There was a loud murmur at the table that showed the Nihilists were getting past all control now, and Verevkin cried:

"To the winds with hospitality and politeness! Our lives are in our own hands, and this man is a spy who has stolen in on us to tell of our beliefs. He has heard us drink to the health of Sofia Ivanowna, and he has but one alternative from death. Let him join us, as you have boasted you would make him, or let him die."

"You've spoken out at last," cried Hammond in a tone as fierce as his own. "Now hear my reply to you, Verevkin, traitor and coward that you are! I will neither join your band of assassins nor die, and but for the rules of hospitality that you despise, I would kill you now. A regiment is looking in at these windows, and you are all my prisoners."

Instantly there was a great confusion as men started up, trembling, and glared round them, expecting to see faces at the windows.

Hammond took advantage of the confusion to stoop down and whisper to Natalie:

"I love you, and I am going to save your life. Farewell!"

Then, before any one knew what he meant, he kissed her before them all, turned and rushed to the window, calling:

"Fire on them if they resist!"

In the confusion caused by his ruse, he reached the window, leaped on the sill, and dropped outside in the moat of the old castle, about fourteen feet below the window.

He knew the distance and came down unhurt, save for a good shaking. On the other side of the moat he saw two horses, a man leading one of them, and he called to Sirotkin:

"Ride along the edge! They may fire at me in a minute."

He ran on in the shadow of the moat, while Sirotkin trotted away, till they came to a place where the bank sloped enough to allow Hammond to scramble up. A moment later he was in the saddle and riding away at a break-neck gallop to the station Toulminka, while behind them the castle was full of noise and confusion, but not a shot was fired.

"I wonder what it means?" he said to Sirotkin. "I expected at least to be shot for my impudence by Boulkin, but they have not even taken the trouble to pursue us. It looks as if they were frightened."

Sirotkin gave a sniff.

"Possibly they are; but I don't believe it, most high-born, I think they are sure of us anyway."

CHAPTER XXIV.

SEALING A TRAIN.

HAMMOND was struck with the tone in which Sirotkin spoke. The Cossack had shown so much cleverness of observation all through their journey together, that his master had fallen into a habit of relying on his judgment to a great extent.

"You think they are sure of us?" he said in a tone of inquiry. "Why so?"

"Your nobility is a great lord, and ought to know best; but for all that I have heard things from Nastasia that your nobility has no opportunity to hear."

"What things, Sirotkin?"

"That every soul at Toulminka is into the plots of these devils of Nihilists; that the men on the railroad are leagued with them, and that they have been exulting ever since your nobility came to Toulminka."

"Tell me what she said."

Sirotkin turned his horse's head to the right.

"If your nobility will ride this way, I shall have time to tell you," he said; "but if we go on to the station, I shall have no time to finish the story."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"That they are waiting for us there," said Sirotkin, "and that the station is mined."

A cold sweat broke out on the forehead of the Yankee Cossack. There is something so terrifying in the idea of a mine, that the best soldiers will recoil from a place said to be tunneled.

Without more hesitation he obeyed Sirotkin's advice, and they rode away at right-angles to their former course.

"Now, most high-born," said Sirotkin, as they galloped along, "I'll tell you the plan that Nastasia and I settled on while you were in the banquet-hall. Nastasia is a good girl, but I had to promise to marry her before she would tell me all, and she has been stuffed so full of this Sofia Ivanowna stuff that she believes in it, and wouldn't tell me what she did till I promised not to use it to hurt any one, but only to save my life. The fact is that your excellency was decoyed here, because the Nihilists found that you were asking too many questions, and they had it all made up to have you killed here, without any one being the wiser. Count Goryautchikoff is the man that laid the plot, but it seems he's not the head man, who is a woman."

"The princess?"

"Oh, no, most high-born. The princess is a great woman among them, but not the head of all. That's Sofia Ivanowna."

"But Sofia Ivanowna is not a person, merely an abstraction of their cause, I think, Sirotkin."

"I don't know that, most high-born, but I do know that there is another woman among them, higher than the princess, who signs all the orders, and is above even the council that we saw. Nastasia told me so, and she seems to know all about it."

"Did she know who it was?"

"No, most high-born; that is the curious part of it all. No one has ever seen the head of the order, according to Nastasia, and no one knows her but the head circle."

"Well, go on—what are their plans?"

"It seems, most high-born, that it was very lucky for us we kept among the Tartars, for if we had come back before the princess was in the castle, we should have been killed in our sleep, blown up with those glass things they used to kill the czar."

"And why did they not do it when we came?"

"That's the strange part of it, most high-born. Nastasia says you have a friend among the Nihilists, and she swears it is a woman."

Hammond thought to himself that he knew who the woman was, but said nothing; and Sirotkin pursued:

"I had a hard time getting the horses out of the stable, most high-born, and if it had not been for Nastasia I might never have done it. She got me in without being seen, and out by the underground passage, that old Prince Boris Koulikoff dug in the days when the Tartars besieged him. But what I was coming to is this, most high-born. Nastasia says that the station is mined, and that they have a telegraph in the castle by which they can blow up the mine whenever they want."

"And how are we to prevent it?"

"I'll tell you, most high-born. They can talk to the station-master, and he can talk back. It's all arranged that as soon as we get to the station he is to invite us to his waiting-room, signal them that you are there, and then go out under some pretense. As soon as he is far enough away, we are to be blown sky-high."

"Well, then, what's your plan now?"

Sirotkin turned his head to listen, for at that moment the scream of the locomotive came over the steppe, far away.

"We must get to the track first," he said. "Gallop till the horses drop, master."

Hammond knew him too well to hesitate, and they spurred their horses, till the animals fairly flew, for ten minutes more, when the iron track appeared before them.

Then Sirotkin pulled up suddenly.

"Now, most high-born," he said rapidly, "we are to play Nihilists awhile. Nastasia has given me a signal to stop the train and the secret password. The guard will ask for it after we are on the train. If he gets too inquisitive, I'll silence him by asking him for the countersign of one of the high circles, which he does not know. Here he comes!"

As he spoke, they saw the light of the locomotive far away like a star, and Sirotkin pulled from his breast a small cartridge, pulled a string, and immediately set a bright-red light flaring up, which he waved to and fro and then threw down.

The scream of the engine answered him, and he went on rapidly:

"They don't stop for us—they only slack up. The Nihilist messengers gallop alongside, and leave their horses to run while they scramble aboard. Here they come!"

Both men started their horses along the track on either side ahead of the train, and soon found it alongside of them, going so slow that they could easily maintain their position and grasp the guard-rails.

Unlike our American cars, these were constructed with a step outside the whole length of the train, and the "guard," as the conductor is called, was coming along the step, swinging his lantern.

It was a matter of comparative ease for the two horsemen to catch the train with both hands and allow themselves to be dragged from the saddle, a feat they performed successfully in a minute more, when Sirotkin called to his master:

"Forward to the engine."

They scrambled along to the engine, heedless of the shouts of the guard, who kept waving his lantern frantically, and arrived there before he did.

Then Sirotkin stepped to the side of the amazed engineer, put a cocked pistol to his head and observed coolly:

"Now, little brother, put on all the steam you can raise and take us past the station at Toulminka without stopping or you'll be in heaven in a minute."

Hammond saw that Sirotkin was quite competent to attend to the engineer, so he turned his attention to the guard, who came up, furiously demanding:

"How dare you come to the engine? Who are you? What do you mean by stopping us?"

"I come in the name of Sofia Ivanowna," said Hammond gravely. "It is necessary for us to get on tonight as fast as we can, or we shall be too late for our work. To what circle do you belong?"

"To the circle of Ostroff," replied the guard, as if bewildered. "What time do you make it?"

"Time to kill tyrants," replied Hammond, at a venture, thinking it a test question and the answer showed he had judged it correctly and had given the wrong answer, for in a moment the guard had put his hand in his pocket, searching for a weapon.

Up went Hammond's pistol in the same moment. There was a flash and report, drowning the noise of the engine; the guard fell off the step, and Hammond saw him roll into the ditch by the roadside. Back he went to the engine, and by the time he got there, saw the light of Toulminka station ahead, with the red lantern in the back, the signal of danger.

He knew it well enough, and told Sirotkin, who only answered:

"If we stop they'll blow us up, most high-born. Speed is our only chance. We may as well be killed one way as another. The red light is only a trick."

On rushed the train, and the red light was waved wildly to and fro.

Hammond began to be nervous.

"There is danger ahead," he said to Sirotkin. "We had better stop."

"If your nobility will let me act, I will bring you safely through," returned the Cossack obstinately. "If we stop, they are going to blow us up."

The engineer, who had been silent from terror, cried out:

"Let me stop, most high-born. We shall all be killed."

"Keep still, animal," retorted Sirotkin. "If we are killed we shall all go to heaven together."

On rushed the train at lightning speed, and they saw the station-master in the road waving the lantern, but the train never stopped. On the contrary,

Sirotkin kept it going as fast as ever; and the station-master had only time to jump out of the way when the cars rushed by him at forty miles an hour.

Hammond, very nervous for the result, looked out eagerly, but saw a clear track ahead of them, and no obstacle visible.

A moment later they rushed past the station in triumph, and were away on the wings of the wind over the flat steppe, when Sirotkin drew a long breath and said:

"We are well out of that, most high-born."

"But what was the plot, Sirotkin?"

"He was to stop the train and hold it till we arrived, most high-born. Nastasia told me. If we had stopped, all would have been discovered; for there are plenty of Nihilists on this train. They won't dare come out now, while we are going so fast, and if your nobility chooses, we'll show them a trick which will surprise them."

"And what is that?"

"Can your nobility keep this animal at his work while I play it?"

"I think so, Sirotkin."

"Let me warn you of one thing, most high-born. As long as we have this train behind us, they won't dare stop us."

"Why not?"

Sirotkin drew his master out of ear-shot, of the engineer, to whisper:

"They won't blow up their own people. We have two more stations to pass before we get out of the Nihilist district. After that, we are safe from them at Rijsk. From there, your nobility can talk to General Milutine."

"Well, what is your trick?" said Hammond a little doubtfully.

"Simply to come on each station of them before they are ready."

"And how shall we do that?"

"Drop the cars first. We shall go so much the faster. Next, put out the head-light and then clap on all the steam we can and race for it, most high-born."

"Put out the head-light? But suppose we run on something?"

"We may as well die one way as another, most high-born. They won't let us get out of their clutches if they can help it. It is our only chance. If we stop there are at least thirty men in this train ready to kill us if the engineer calls for help."

"Do as you will, Sirotkin."

Sirotkin seemed greatly pleased, and said:

"Tell the animal we are going to stop. Tell him to let off steam, but not to whistle down brakes."

The engineer did as he was bid and the train ran on, the cars pressing close on the tender, when Sirotkin stooped and withdrew the coupling-pin.

Then he came to his master and said:

"Now, most high-born, put on all steam again; and let us see what will happen."

On rushed the engine, and very soon began to leave the cars behind, the wheels revolving with fearful rapidity and the locomotive fairly flying.

Sirotkin spoke to the engineer.

"Go down, animal, and put out the light in front."

The engineer, all aghast, looked out in front and shuddered, crying:

"It is impossible. I shall be killed."

"You say true," replied Sirotkin coolly. "You'll be killed anyhow if you don't. Go forward, or—"

The click of his pistol decided the engineer. He crept forward and put out the light, just as the lamps of another station showed ahead of the train.

On they rushed till the telegraph poles by the track seemed to blend together like the posts of a fence, and past the next station they swept, noticing a crowd of people on the platform.

"That's Samoffka," quoth Sirotkin, with a sigh of relief. "Oh, most high-born, if those people had been Cossacks they would have stopped us, easily."

They swept on, faster than ever, till another station appeared ahead, and they saw something in the track which looked like a crowd of people.

"If they are pulling up the track," said Sirotkin coolly, "this is our last minute together, most high-born. I don't think they have begun soon enough; but this is certain: in three minutes we shall either be safe or in heaven."

Within that time they were close on the crowd, saw red lanterns waving wildly and a great pile of loose wood on the track.

Sirotkin spoke to the engineer:

"More steam, son of an animal!"

A throb of the engine, as they dashed on; a sudden shock, slight but perceptible, and the pile of wood was sent flying high in the air by the rush of the locomotive, and on they flew, faster than ever.

Sirotkin uttered a yell and threw his arms round his master shouting:

"Pardon me, most high-born, but I couldn't help it. We two Cossacks have beaten them all, thanks to a woman! That is the last Nihilist station."

"Are you sure of it, Sirotkin?"

"Certain, most high-born. The next is Rijsk."

"Then it is time we made use of our knowledge to help others. Now comes my turn."

He spoke to the engineer:

"You are a Nihilist and in our power. Do you know it?"

The man began to tremble.

"No one can accuse me—"

Hammond cut him short.

"No one does. I give you a chance for your life. If we go on to Rijsk, you will be whipped till you confess. If you do as I want you to do, you shall go free."

The engineer trembled.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to take this engine back to the last station and tell the people that you shot us two. That's all."

"But I've no pistol, most high-born."

Hammond fired one of his own pistols in the air, and handed him the empty weapon saying:

"That will do. Now stop and reverse the engine. Remember that if you let out the fact that we are alive, I know you, and you shall be flogged to death."

The engineer seemed to be greatly relieved for he said: "I have reversed the engine."

"Your nobility can depend upon me. That is not much to do."

The locomotive slackened up and stopped as the two Cossacks jumped off.

A moment later it was dashing back to Samoffka, and Hammond said to his follower, who had been silent: "You don't understand why I did that?"

Sirotkin saluted.

"It is none of my business, most high-born. Your nobility commands, I obey."

"Very good, Sirotkin. I have changed my mind as to going to St. Petersburg. I want to find out how many Nihilists there are in Russia, and to do that I must be dead. Have you a brother?"

"No, most high-born."

"Then from henceforth I am your brother, and you and I will travel together."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PRISONER OF GATSKINA.

A whole year later the young autocrat of all the Russias was pacing moodily up and down the gardens at Gatschina.

He was dressed in a loose fatigue frock, and wore revolvers under his coat, while at every turn of the path, all the way from the palace to the outskirts of the park, an armed sentry was in sight.

The handsome face of the young czar looked gloomy and troubled. He had been a virtual prisoner at Gatschina ever since his father's death, to the surprise and mockery of all Europe and America.

The papers caricatured him as trembling with fear at every step, and asked sarcastic questions as to when he was going to be placed on the throne and crowned in Moscow.

And all this time the young czar, generally a brave and energetic man, a great wrestler and boxer, a daring huntsman, and one who had never known what fear was till the day of the explosion, remained at Gatschina, apparently paralyzed with terror. His minister visited him daily; the vicinity of the palace swarmed with police and spies; it seemed as if no enemy could get near Gatschina, yet the czar remained in his garden, and never stirred, even there, out of sight of the sentries.

That morning he was walking up and down, more gloomy than usual.

His minister of police had just left him, with the news that toasts to Sofia Ivanowna were being drunk in nearly half the bodies that compose the Imperial Guard, and that the officers professed themselves unable to find the culprits.

Anonymous letters were being constantly sent through the mail to the minister, and one letter on being opened with a pair of tongs by his secretary, according to the cautious plan adopted, had exploded and wounded the secretary.

Anonymous notes had been found by the sentries in the garden, thrown over the wall in the night without visible hands, and the czar began to suspect the sentries also.

So far no letter had been brought to his own personal notice, but the depressing effect of the constant annoyance began to be manifest on his stalwart frame.

It is one thing to face one's enemies boldly, and another not to know who, where or what they are; to suspect every one in the world, to be a monarch hated by the people, to imagine a revolution constantly impending.

The czar felt like Louis the Sixteenth, in 1790, as if all the world were against him, and he had not a friend in his kingdom.

As for his ministers, he had no confidence in them. They drew their salaries, and that was all they did. They could not give him particulars of his foes, had not discovered a single name, and yet kept promising discoveries all the time.

His minister of war, General Milutine, was particularly exasperating, for he was always bringing in news of treasonable outcries from regiments in the army, and always unable to locate a single ring-leader as the origin of the disturbance.

As the czar thought of all these things, he stamped furiously on the grass, and said to himself, aloud: "This suspense will kill me! Better to go out and get killed like my father, than to die a hundred deaths by anticipation! To-morrow I will go to St. Petersburg."

He had said the same thing a hundred times before, and had always been overpersuaded by his ministers, who begged for nothing so much as time. With time they promised to unfold everything, and arrest all the Nihilists in Russia.

The czar began to believe that they would have to depopulate the country. It seemed to him as if the Nihilists were everywhere.

Buried in these gloomy thoughts, he was roused to a nervous start by a footstep, and looked up, feeling instinctively for a revolver, for the new-comer was a stranger.

A tall, handsome, bearded young man, dressed in the full uniform of a colonel of the Red Cossacks, with the aide-de-camp's aiguillettes falling from his right shoulder.

The czar looked at him fixedly as he advanced, and said, harshly:

"Who are you, sir, and how did you come in here?"

"By your majesty's orders," was the cool reply, with a salute.

"By my orders?" echoed the czar. "Why, I do not know you."

"That is because I have followed the old Russian fashion of beards since your majesty saw me last," said the young officer, with a smile. "Possibly your majesty recognizes your own order."

He pulled out a paper and handed it to the czar, who read:

"The bearer, Colonel Count Ammonoff, is my personal aide. He will be admitted to me at all times."

"ALEXANDER."

Then he stared at Ammonoff as if surprised, observing slowly:

"Sir, I thought you were dead."

"I intended your majesty should do so," said the Yankee Cossack, quietly. "Without my apparent death, nothing could have been accomplished toward the end your majesty told me to pursue."

The czar passed his hand across his brow, as if trying to recall something.

"Pardon me," he said, "if my memory be at fault. I remember you in happier days, when I was a soldier, not afraid to face the enemy, knowing who he was. What did I tell you to do? I have forgotten."

"Your majesty told me to hunt out the men who slew your father, and give into your hands the secrets of Nihilism."

The czar sighed.

"Yes, yes; I've told that to all my ministers, and they give me nothing but promises as yet. Do you think you have succeeded where they have failed? You are a—"

"An American, sire."

The czar brightened up.

"True, true—I remember all now. I *did* have great faith in you till I heard you were killed. Who spread the report?"

"Myself, sire. It was a year ago when I surprised the supreme circle of the Nihilists and overheard their secrets. I was pursued to your majesty's dominions; but they did not know all. They tried to kill me to hide what they thought I knew. I was very nearly visiting your majesty a year since with an incomplete report, when the idea struck me that by giving out my own death I might perfect the report. I did so, and exchanged identity with another man—a Cossack called Sirotkin. I became his brother, and pretended to become a full convert to Nihilism. I joined a circle, and was advanced from place to place till I was admitted to their factory of explosives. It lies in the Ural mountains, near the city of Orenburg."

The czar began to look excited now.

"And the leaders?" he asked.

"I knew them from the first, sire; but here is a complete list of the supreme and six governing circles. Your majesty will see why it is that your ministers have not been able to root out Nihilism. Its adherents are few, but among them are the loftiest names in Russia."

He handed the czar a paper, which the young autocrat eagerly scanned, and then threw down with a groan, exclaiming:

"Show me no more! My own flesh and blood are in the plot!"

He had seen, at the head of the list, the name of his own uncle, the grand duke, who would be heir to the throne in the event of the destruction of his brother's family.

Ammonoff picked up the paper and said:

"And now, sire, the question comes, why should not your majesty be crowned next month?"

The czar started.

"What do you mean? Crowned? I? By heavens, sir, I would that I were a simple Russian gentleman with no crown. It is horrible, that list. Have you evidence to convict them?"

Ammonoff bowed.

"I can satisfy your majesty entirely on that point; but it was not for punishment that I prepared that list, sire."

"What was it for, then?" asked the czar, with some surprise and coldness.

"To save your majesty from further shame and humiliation; to give Russia a crowned czar who shall be the father of his people; for I think this list paves the way for a complete reformation in Russia."

The czar looked puzzled and Ammonoff went on:

"I am an American, as your majesty is aware, and republican in principle. I have had the honor of saying so while you were still only czarevitch."

The czar smiled.

"I remember now. You were very plain in your talk that night on the Balkans. But I don't believe in republicanism. I told you then you did not understand our people. The Russians need a firm hand on them to keep them from killing each other."

Ammonoff smiled back at the czar.

"May I speak plainly to you, sire?"

"Surely you may."

"Then I would say that for a year past the Russians have had no hand on the reins, yet they have not killed each other."

The czar frowned.

"Am I to infer then that you think this is a healthy state of affairs?"

"Exactly the contrary, sire. It is a most ruinous state of affairs and decidedly unhealthy."

The czar looked pleased, but melancholy, as he answered:

"That's all very well, but what is to be done in the case?"

"Your majesty has the remedy in your own hands," replied Ammonoff firmly.

"How, sir?"

"By giving back to Russia the firm hand on the rein she needs."

The czar looked more gloomy than before as he said:

"I begin to think, after all, that you were right and I wrong. We seem to have changed places in the argument."

"By no means, sire. I am still republican in sentiment, and your majesty is a born autocrat. It remains for you to show to Russia that the days of benevolent despotism have not passed forever."

The czar shook his head.

"I fear you are only a dreamer, sir. You do not know the Russians. They are ignorant and easily led away, and these Nihilists have got them all mad. Two-thirds of my people, for all I know, may thirst for my blood. It is the effect of freeing the serfs possibly. My father was foolish to do it. He only alienated the nobility and did not gain the love of the peasantry as he hoped."

Hammond remained silent while the czar talked, and then answered:

"I think your majesty underrates the love of the people for your person and for your father. I have studied the people for a year, and have found this: as a rule the Nihilists belong to the noble classes, and the peasants keep aloof from them. There are not twenty thousand of them in all Russia, but they belong to the intelligent class, can all read and write and they understand the advantage of mystery."

The czar listened eagerly.

"What is this you say? Twenty thousand in all? Why, Milutine has estimated that half the army is tainted with the heresy."

"General Milutine exaggerates what he sees and hears. Your majesty can easily test the number of Nihilists in the guard."

"How, sir?"

"Order a review. Announce that you are going there. Let it be in St. Petersburg. At the same time, let Milutine order every man on this list, including your uncle, the grand duke. Make them all ride by you, as your personal staff, and give the duty of escort to the Cossacks. If a man of the staff drops out we shall know there is a mine ahead of us, and it will be the signal for the rest to scat.

ter. Compel them all to ride close to you, and my word for it, there will be no explosion. These leaders are not the stuff to sacrifice themselves to kill you. They leave that to their dupes, the few peasants and shopkeepers who do the dirty work of the order and are not trusted with its secrets. In that list lies your majesty's and Russia's salvation.

The czar took the list again and scanned it with a kindling eye.

"I'll hang every man, woman and child of them," he said angrily.

"In which case your majesty will turn over the control from the nobility, who will not let the movement go too far, to the others, who are crazy revolutionists, with the one idea of dynamite as a panacea for all political evils. I would entreat your majesty to take a leaf from American policy."

"In what way, sir?" asked the czar quickly.

"You seem to be a man of resource. I may even take your advice on this point."

Hammond flushed with some pride as he answered quietly:

"It is not my idea, but a national one. We had a great rebellion once, which nearly broke our nation to pieces. It failed, and we knew all the ringleaders. They were helpless and absolutely in our power. In Russia executions would have followed, and other rebellions after the executions. In America we did not execute one man for treason, and we shall never have another rebellion. If your majesty wishes to rule Russia and strangle the monster Nihilism, remember that a failure and the mercy of contempt kills revolutions, when bloodshed makes them grow like weeds."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CZAR'S RIDE.

THE czar listened to the Yankee Cossack in silence. He was not often spoken to in so plain a manner.

"I must have time to think over this," he said slowly. "You have done a great deal, sir; more than all my ministers and police, if your information is correct; but I do not see why it would not be best to arrest all these people at once, and send them to Siberia, if not hang them all. Besides, I see no names of women on this list, and it is notorious that there is one Sofia Ivanowna, who is their queen. Have you not found her?"

Hammond looked at the ground.

"I have, your majesty, but I cannot tell her name."

The czar frowned.

"Why not, sir?"

The aide-de-camp raised his eyes boldly.

"Because the lady saved my life, sire, by refusing to vote for my death when all the council clamored for it. Moreover, she is a woman who has been led away by the love of intrigue, but she has a heart not all insensible to pity."

"Hum!" observed the czar dryly. "You speak as if there were a tender spot in your own heart for this lady."

"There is, sire. With your majesty's kind permission I intend to marry her," was the cool reply.

The czar stared at him and burst out laughing.

"Upon my word a most notable plan. My aide is to marry the queen of the Nihilists, and I am to consent to the wedding. When is it to take place?"

"On the day of your majesty's coronation," said Ammonoff calmly, "that is, if your majesty will give the order that I am about to ask for."

"And what is that, sir? Upon my word you Americans have boldness enough."

"Boldness is necessary in affairs of state, sire; and, if your majesty gives the order, I will answer for it that the coronation in Moscow passes off without accident, and that the Nihilists cease to annoy you."

"That is a promising programme, truly," said the czar wistfully. "But how am I to be certain you have the power to fulfill it?"

"Your majesty can test it. That list contains the names of seventy-five leaders of the order, including the Supreme Council, all but the women. Let your majesty order all the persons contained therein to attend you at the review of the guard at St. Petersburg. I myself will remain by your majesty, so that if any mine explodes, I suffer at the same time. But let your majesty come out boldly like a soldier and face your foes. The longer you remain in Gatchina, the bolder are the Nihilists. They boast that they have cowed you; that you fear for your life. For my part I would rather die like a man at once, than purchase the life of a prisoner at the price of the name of a coward."

He was watching the young czar closely as he spoke, and saw the hot blood leap to his face, as he exclaimed fiercely:

"Who says I'm a coward?"

"The Nihilists, sire. Here is a proclamation that was torn down by the police only last night, and I found a copy in the road before your very gate. Will your majesty read it?"

He drew from his breast a coarse yellow handbill, printed in Russian, and showed it to the czar, who read it with a burning face and kindling eye.

It ran thus:

"ROSSIANS:—A thousand years ago the people of Novogorod, being unable to keep order, sent for Ruric the Northman to rule over them. Since then Russia has seen no more order than she had before these strangers came. Is it not time to send them all beyond the sea again? Ruric was a man; Peter was a man; Nicholas was a man; Alexanders have all been women, and this third Alexander is lower than a woman. He is a coward. He dare not take his throne for fear of a woman. How long will Russians be ruled by the coward of Gatchina?"

"By the Brotherhood:

"SOFIA IVANOWNA."

The czar had turned scarlet when he ended the handbill, and he crushed it furiously in his hand and threw it down.

"Why did they not show this to me?" he asked, in tones hoarse from fury.

Ammonoff smiled, well pleased.

"Your majesty means—"

"My ministers! curse them!"

"Because they desire this state of things to continue, sire. As long as your majesty is shut up in Gatchina, they rule the country as they will, and tell you only what they please. If I may advise—"

"Speak on, sir."

"I would say, let your majesty order your horse now, and take a ride to St. Petersburg, with an escort of none but Cossacks."

"Why Cossacks, sir?"

"Because the Nihilists, with all their wily tricks, have only corrupted five Cossacks in the country, of whom three are officers, one a sergeant and one a trumpeter."

"Very well, sir, what then?"

"Let your majesty ride out now without a word of warning, take every one in St. Petersburg by surprise, and enter the palace of your race to issue an ukase."

The czar drew a long breath. There was that in the bold demeanor of Hammond which came to him like a sea breeze on a hot day. It braced him up.

"I'll go," he said, firmly. "Tell no one of this proclamation. Hide it. I will answer it in person, and win or lose my kingdom in another hour."

He turned and strode toward the house, where he was met by a score of bowing and obsequious servants.

"Call the officer of the Cossack guard that patrols outside," he said to one. "Order my horse, and—Have you a horse, Ammonoff?"

"No, sire; I came by the train."

"Order two horses," pursued the czar. "I want the horses and the officer in five minutes."

The servants dispersed as if they feared a whipping. The face of the czar had lost all its gloom, and was only sternly commanding.

"Come with me," he said briefly to Ammonoff, and they traversed a long corridor to a large saloon, where sat a sweet, fair-haired lady, the Czarina Dagmar, with two children by her. Hammond knew her in a minute, a young, fresh, girlish creature, full of high spirits that even the somber surroundings of Gatchina could not quell.

"I am going to St. Petersburg," said the czar, abruptly, "and I wish you to follow in the carriage with the escort as soon as your maids can pack up. This officer is Count Ammonoff, my personal aide, and he tells me that my ministers have deceived me. The Nihilists are a myth. I am going to test his news now. Good-by."

The empress had turned very white; but she was a Dane, and she looked up boldly, saying:

"As your majesty pleases. It must end at some time or other."

For a moment the czar seemed on the point of breaking down, for he loved his wife tenderly, but he affected a stern air, and added:

"Farewell till we meet again."

Then he stalked out to the front steps, to find the horses there, saddled, and a Cossack officer waiting, puzzled, but respectful.

"How many men have you, captain?" the emperor asked him.

"Only two sotinas, sire; but there is a whole pluk three verst off, if your majesty has any desire to—"

"Hush!" said the czar, sharply, and then he turned to Hammond to ask:

"How many men do you want?"

"If your majesty will trust to me—"

"I will, sir. And mind, if yours is the trust, yours shall be the responsibility also."

"Then, sire," said the aide-de-camp, boldly, "I say that we need no escort."

The czar compressed his lips and turned a shade paler. The change from excessive caution to excessive boldness awed him, but he only answered with a slightly trembling voice:

"Very well. Let us go. I give you command."

Hammond turned to the Cossack officer:

"My compliments to the colonel of your regiment. Tell him to break up camp at once and follow his majesty to the Winter Palace at St. Petersburg. That's all. Now, if your majesty is ready—"

He held the stirrup while the czar mounted, and then vaulted into the saddle of the other horse, and touched his cap in salute.

"Does your majesty prefer to ride ahead, or shall I go forward as an outrider?"

"Neither," said the czar dryly. "Ride by my side."

As he spoke he dashed in his spurs. Hammond followed his example, and they started down the broad gravel sweep to the gate of the park, at a tearing gallop.

Once outside, a dusty stretch of road, quite empty of people, lay before them, and away they went like sky-rockets, leaving a broad trail of dust behind them.

They rode at nearly twelve miles an hour till the horses were reeking with sweat and the czar began to laugh aloud in the novelty and excitement of the first rapid ride he had taken in a year.

"By heavens, Ammonoff!" he cried, "if we get to St. Petersburg alive, I shall call you my magical physician. I begin to feel like a man once more. But shall we get there, think you?"

Hammond smiled proudly.

"I told your majesty I would be responsible for that," he answered. "This ride will show the Nihilists that the czar does not fear to trust his people, and that's half the battle."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PEOPLE'S WELCOME.

THE streets of St. Petersburg were in an uproar, after being quiet as a church for nearly a year, and the secret police were scared to death.

They thought a revolution was beginning when they heard the shouting, and all over the city the Cossacks were under arms and ready to repel a Nihilist revolt.

General Milutine and the minister of police were listening to reports from agents, representing rampant Nihilism all over Russia; and when they heard the shouting they imagined at once that an uprising had commenced.

They telegraphed to all the barracks to turn out the Imperial Guard, thirty thousand strong, and the troops were in the street, marching toward the palace, in five minutes after the message was on the wire. Then, as they came nearer to the Winter Palace, they found the Newsky Prospect all packed from end to end with a howling mob of peasants, who seemed to be frantic with joy, and stood waving their hats and roaring in unison:

"GOD PRESERVE OUR FATHER CZAR!"

The officers at the head of the different columns brandished their swords and shouted to the people to get out of the way, and the peasants made an

effort to get to either side of the road, but all the while they kept jumping up to see over each others' heads and look at something toward the Winter Palace, while they roared, louder than ever, "God preserve the czar!"

"What's all this noise about?" shouted a handsome officer in the uniform of an aide-de-camp, who came dashing up at the head of the column.

He addressed the colonel of a regiment of grenadiers, who scowled as he replied:

"You know as much as I do, Count Goryautchikoff."

Then he added, in a low tone:

"I hope it has begun; for, between you and me, these peasants are such fools that a word would sway them either way."

Goryautchikoff listened to the shouting, and turned a shade paler.

"They're not shouting for us; they're yelling for him," he muttered to the colonel.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"They'd do that anyway. I'm afraid they're not ripe for our ideas yet, Goryautchikoff. Every soldier converted is like pulling a tooth, and our only chance is to keep the fool of Gatchina scared. If he strips the mask off us once, we may as well make our peace with the powers of Heaven."

"I'll find what's the matter," said Goryautchikoff, and he rode his horse into the crowd, crying:

"What's the matter here? Why do you shout?"

"The czar! the czar! the Little Father has come!" shouted an old gray-bearded peasant, dancing wildly. "God bless the czar, and down with the scum of Sofia Ivanowna!"

"Down with Sofia Ivanowna!" roared the peasants all round, catching the cry. "God preserve the czar! HURRA! HURRA!"

Goryautchikoff bit his lip savagely.

"Let me through!" he cried. "I am aide-de-camp to his majesty."

"Room for the czar's officer! Hurra!" roared the crowd, and they made way for him as he passed through at a slow trot, till he arrived in front of the palace, where he hoped to find a solution of the mystery of a crowd which could stop the troops.

Right in front of the grand staircase he stopped, as if petrified.

The young czar, with a single aide-de-camp beside him, and not a soldier in sight, sat on horseback at the foot of the white marble steps, surrounded with the mob of peasants, who were kissing his feet, his raiment, his saddle, his very horse, weeping like children, while he himself seemed to be overcome with his feelings, for he was pale and his eyes full of tears.

Goryautchikoff rode closer, and shouted:

"Come away, you animals! How dare you crowd on his majesty like that?"

The voice hushed the crowd instantly, and the peasants began to back away, crying:

"Room for the father czar! God bless the czar!"

Alexander turned his head, saw Goryautchikoff, and whispered to his other aide, who nodded. Then the czar turned his face again, and said to the astounded officer:

"Count Goryautchikoff, I believe, Grand. What is it, Ammonoff?"

Goryautchikoff could hardly restrain a start, with all his self-command, as the man he had believed dead answered:

"Grand Proselyte, if I remember right, sire. It is one of their silly formulas, and means nothing but the jargon of Sofia Ivanowna. Goryautchikoff will make no proselytes. I hope your majesty is satisfied."

Goryautchikoff had turned livid as he heard the words, and he trembled as the czar proceeded, with a frown:

"You will remain near my person for the future, Count Goryautchikoff, and sleep in the palace. Follow me now."

He turned to the crowd.

"Give me room, my children," he said. "I am coming to live among you now, and from henceforth I shall have no escort. My best escort is you, my children."

The people roared themselves hoarse at the words, and the czar slowly dismounted and walked up the steps, followed by Ammonoff and Goryautchikoff—the latter officer very pale and gloomy.

At the door they met a sentry, who presented arms stolidly—the only person who showed no astonishment during the trip from Gatchina—and the czar entered the palace for the first time in a year of misery and gloom.

He walked quickly up stairs to his cabinet, and entered it, followed by the two aides.

Then he threw himself into a chair, and said to the Yankee Cossack:

"Count Ammonoff, a year ago I gave you your commission as colonel and aide. I promised you something if you on your part did something for me. You have done it. Now you shall have your reward. What is that order you spoke of this morning? I will sign it."

Hammond pulled from his saber tasche a folded paper, which he handed to the czar saying:

"I request your majesty to read it first, for it is very sweeping."

The emperor took it and read as follows:

"Colonel Count Ammonoff is hereby ordered to marry ———, and the lady is ordered to marry him on pain of arrest and trial for complicity in Nihilist plots."

"Why have you left the name blank?" asked the czar, looking at him curiously.

"Your majesty will never know what the name was, till it is too late," returned Hammond. "I wish to save the lady's life."

The czar frowned slightly, but drew a pen toward him and signed the paper, which he delivered to Hammond, observing:

"I give you a great power, sir; but I never want to see your wife. Your commission as general shall be made out to-morrow."

Then he turned to Goryautchikoff with a severe look, and the trembling aide could not look him in the face.

"Well, sir," he said, "so it seems that you and Verevkin, men of my own staff, are followers of Sofia Ivanowna, contrivers of assassination, the while you eat my bread. Is that so?"

"No, sire," replied Goryautchikoff, making at

effort to brave it out. "I defy any man to prove any such thing on me."

The czar looked at Ammonoff. "You hear him?" he said. "Your advice has been good so far. What should I do now?"

Ammonoff shrugged his shoulders. "I have already told your majesty that in failure and ridicule lies the death of Nihilism. Shall I give the order to General Milutine, sire? I hardly think Count Goryautchikoff has courage to attempt to kill your majesty, single-handed. It is one thing to meet out in the steppe by Fort Alexis and pass resolutions of murder; another to execute them, face to face. This, sire, is the Grand Proselyte of the Nihilists. He wished to pass a resolution of death against me, because he had not the courage to call me out like a man of honor."

The czar rose and came striding down on Goryautchikoff, who shrunk before him, and Alexander burst into a laugh.

"Is this gentleman a real Nihilist?" he said. "Why, I thought they were desperate fellows. Go on, Ammonoff. This gentleman would not hurt a fly."

He took his seat and pointed imperiously to another.

"Sit down, Count Nihilist, and answer my questions. How do you open one of your circles, as you call them?"

Goryautchikoff wiped the sweat from his forehead, and whispered:

"Ask Ammonoff. I am not a Nihilist."

"You mistake me," said the czar smiling in a sarcastic way. "I, too, wish to be a Nihilist. I am going to send for your chief people hereafter, and we will have you hold circles in the palace for the entertainment of my family. I want my servants to see what fools men can be. If you consent to tell all the secrets, you shall retain your place on my household staff, as long as you wish. That's what I mean. You can buy your own safety by selling the rest."

Goryautchikoff looked up haggardly at the Yankee Cossack to ask:

"And if I reveal all, what assurance have I of safety from the brotherhood? They kill any traitor to the cause."

The czar shrugged his shoulders.

"That must be your own affair. You are safe enough in the palace, and I shall take pleasure in having you near me all the time to identify Nihilists."

Goryautchikoff made an eager motion.

"I can tell you all the names, sire, and tell every secret of the order."

The czar's lip curled, and he turned to his other aide to say:

"Count Ammonoff, you were right. This is not the stuff of the bomb-throwers are made. Go and tell Milutine to issue the order at once. Summon them all."

Ammonoff left the room, and the czar began to question Goryautchikoff and wrote down his answers.

When the Yankee Cossack came back, he found Goryautchikoff apparently as busy as a bee in giving information.

The czar beckoned to him.

"You've been at their councils. Tell me if this man gives me the truth or not."

Hammond examined the paper and found everything correct. Goryautchikoff had turned traitor conscientiously.

CHAPTER XXIX. YANKEE PLUCK.

ST. PETERSBURG was all agog for a week with the news that the czar and czarina had come back to the Winter Palace; that the czar had ridden from Gatschina unescorted; that he had issued an ukase, announcing his formal coronation at Moscow in a month, and that all the crowned heads and ambassadors had been invited to the spectacle, which was to be the finest thing of the kind that had ever been seen.

In the midst of the excitement, unusual bustle was observed among the secret police, who made journeys from place to place, while it was noticed that a great many prominent persons were constantly followed by men who were supposed to be servants, but had certain mysterious signals by which they recognized each other, while they never let their masters go out of their sight.

Goryautchikoff, Verevkin and Baron Boulkin were constantly in and about the palace, each with an attendant, and it was at first only whispered, but latterly openly asserted, that they and seventy more were under police surveillance as the leaders of Nihilism.

But the strangest part of the matter was that these very people remained at the palace constantly, took part in the festivities that prevailed, and were treated with marked favor by the czar.

"Sofia Ivanowna," instead of being a forbidden name, was on every one's lips.

General Count Ammonoff, first aide-de-camp to the czar, was active in the city and constantly making journeys to Moscow by rail.

In truth the Yankee Cossack was by no means so free from anxiety as he looked, and by no means certain that the coronation would be carried through without accident.

The leaders of Nihilism had been taken into custody and exposed, the police spies were on them day and night; but Ammonoff knew that with the leaders away the lower circles of more ignorant men would be more active than ever.

The coronation was to be the test whether Alexander III or Sofia Ivanowna should rule Russia, and as the days rolled by and the preparations proceeded the Yankee Cossack became more and more anxious.

Three weeks after the czar's return to the city of St. Petersburg, Ammonoff went in one day to see the chief of police, who told him with a smile:

"Ah, by the way, count, these gentlemen under surveillance are beginning to try and make their peace with justice."

"How?" asked Ammonoff.

"By confessing their accomplices, who seem to be mostly women that one would never suspect of such things."

"Have any of them been arrested?" asked the Yankee Cossack, as indifferently as he could.

"No, that is the strange part of it. Goryautchikoff and Verevkin have furnished the names to his majesty, and I expected an order to put them under

arrest at once, or at least under surveillance; but the czar peremptorily forbid it till he had seen you."

"Then I suppose that means that you wish me to report at once?"

"It would relieve me of great embarrassment, my dear count, if you would."

Hammond rose and went away, feeling that something had to be done, if he hoped to save the Princess Koulikoff, and that quickly.

The infamous readiness of Goryautchikoff and Verevkin to betray their associates in the hope of saving their own lives and fortunes was threatening all his hopes.

He had secured the order from the czar to be used only as a last resort to save Natalie's life, and had not intended to use it.

He realized the reason of Goryautchikoff's action at last to be largely jealousy.

The Nihilist hoped to marry the wealthy widow of Prince Koulikoff, and had noted the marked favor she extended to Hammond on account of his congeniality.

"He wanted to get me out of the way," thought the Yankee Cossack, "and, failing that, hopes to get her out of my way now. Well, it remains to be seen whether a Russian can beat a Yankee. I must get hold of Sirotkin again."

Sirotkin, his faithful Cossack, had not come to St. Petersburg with him, and the count sat down at once and telegraphed to Toulminka:

"TO SIROTKIN PETROVITCH, station-master:—
"Is the princess at home?" AMMONOFF."

The answer came back in half an hour:

"Princess home. Nastasia with her.
"SIROTKIN,
"Station-master."

Armed with this dispatch, Ammonoff sought the czar, and found him in his cabinet, looking excited and angry.

"So," he said, as soon as the American entered the room, "I find what is your reason for wishing an ukase to compel one of my subjects to marry you. You would marry the richest widow in my dominions, and save the organizer of all this trouble from just punishment. You are a shrewd man, monsieur—too shrewd. I am not to be tricked that way."

"I have not hoped to trick your majesty," was the quiet response. "I told your majesty that I wished to save one life, and your majesty gave it to me. If your majesty wishes to take it back, remember that the word of the czar can be broken, but that it will be a confession that your majesty fears a woman."

"That may be," returned Alexander crossly, "but I cannot shut my eyes to the facts now before me. Goryautchikoff and Verevkin have confessed to me that Sofia Ivanowna is none other than the Princess Natalie Koulikoff, and I have signed an order to arrest and send her to Siberia."

Hammond's face flushed.

"Then I request your majesty to accept my resignation at once. I am of no further service, and I wish to leave the country."

The czar looked disturbed.

"I don't see any necessity for that, count. This woman is dangerous. She is the organizer of murder. To marry her is an act of madness for you, and still more a madness for me to abet it. I cannot accept your resignation. I need you."

"Then," said Hammond fiercely, "if your majesty needs me, I must have my way. I am not a Russian, neither am I afraid of your majesty's anger. If the Princess Koulikoff goes to Siberia I leave your majesty's service, by resignation if you prefer it, by death, imprisonment or desertion in the other event. I decline to serve your majesty another instant!"

He looked the czar straight in the eye and the young autocrat saw that he was in earnest, for he said pettishly:

"You Americans, with all your republicanism can be more tyrannical than the Russians. What must I do? I cannot recall the order."

"Give me an order to take the princess from custody and bring her to see your majesty," said Hammond coolly. "I'll answer for the rest. Who has been charged with her capture?"

The czar colored slightly.

"Goryautchikoff. I did it to test him."

Hammond smiled bitterly.

"Your majesty did a wise thing. If they escape together outside of Russian limits, the Nihilists will be stronger than ever. Give me the order and I answer for consequences. Refuse it, and your majesty's ministers can manage the coronation alone."

Without a word the czar wrote the order and handed it to him.

"Take it, tyrant," he said pettishly. "I hold you responsible for all that happens."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CAPTURE OF A QUEEN.

An hour later Hammond was in the train speeding to Toulminka.

Before starting he telegraphed to Sirotkin:

"Two men are coming to arrest princess. Keep the train to take them away till I come."

"AMMONOFF."

In the train with him were a dozen men of the Guard Cossacks and he felt that with them at his back he could take away Natalie from any one.

Goryautchikoff who had the order of arrest, he heard, had taken with him nearly twenty men of the secret police, anticipating resistance on the part of the princess's tenants.

The passage to Toulminka was made with great rapidity but it seemed to him as if the train crawled, so impatient was he.

Goryautchikoff's train was two hours ahead, and his own locomotive only managed to gain a single hour upon it by the time they got to Toulminka.

When they arrived the first thing he saw was the other train leaving the station just ahead of him, while Sirotkin (who had been made station-master a year since at the request of Nastasia, whom he had married according to his promise), was running up and down the platform waving a red flag wildly.

As soon as the train stopped, Hammond leaped out and hurried to his old follower.

"Have they taken her to Orenburg?"

Sirotkin shook his head.

"No, most high-born, it is a trick, a vile trick.

They have sent off my wife, Nastasia, to personate her mistress, and the rest have fled to the steppe."

For a moment Hammond was stunned by the news and then he recovered himself saying to Sirotkin:

"They have gone to Alexis to alarm Anderson and flee to Persia or China. We must get to Orenburg and rescue Nastasia. They beat us last year and we'll beat them this year at their own trick. Jump on."

Sirotkin, a thing lo'h, jumped on and away went the train in pursuit of the one ahead while the Cossack told his master what had happened in his absence.

Sirotkin had come to Toulminka a year before, immediately after his master's death—as given out by him—with a letter to Princess Natalie. In this letter Ammonoff, stating that it was written in expectation of death, told her of Sirotkin's love for the maid, Nastasia, and implored her to take care of him and see that his love did not end as unhappily as Ammonoff's.

This letter, according to Sirotkin, produced a great effect on the princess when he delivered it and she at once obeyed its provisions, appointing Sirotkin head of her stables and marrying him to Nastasia.

On the death of Mitri Dimitrovitch, the station-master at Toulminka, which happened six months after Sirotkin came to Natalie, the Cossack, at his own request had been put in his place and had lived at the station ever since.

"And this morning, after your message, most high-born," said Sirotkin, "the train came with the men, as your nobility said, and they drove off to the castle in telegas. When they came back I had invented a story that there was an accident ahead and tried to stop them, but they refused and got into the train. As they did so I saw their prisoner dressed in the clothes of the princess and as I came close to her she made me a private signal. Then I discovered it was my wife Nastasia and I saw the trick. I got close to her and insisted on speaking to her and they did not dare to refuse me, for I swore I would telegraph to Orenburg to hold them if I was not allowed to speak to her. Then she told me all. She is as hot a Nihilist as ever and is going to Orenburg on purpose to fool the police. Goryautchikoff and Verevkin have gone off with the princess and the police believe Nastasia to be her mistress. They will only be let into the secret at Orenburg."

Hammond listened in silence and then said grimly to his follower:

"It is a pretty trick, but I know one still better. We'll post to Alexis from Orenburg and be there before them. Now, at last, I have these traitors where I want them."

The coronation of the czar is now a matter of history.

It passed off quietly, distinguished only by its surpassing splendor as a pageant. Rumors of Nihilist plots were rife all over Europe, but at Moscow the Russian peasants shouted and drank to the czar and not a Nihilist was seen or heard of.

In the procession that preceded and followed the czar to the great cathedral could be seen, however, one body of gentlemen, but for whose peaceful presence the story might have been a different one.

They were the Nihilist leaders, known only to the czar and the police, and they were kept close to the imperial person all the day long, till the ceremony was performed, which gave defiance to the oft-repeated threats of the bulletins of "Sofia Ivanowna" that Alexander would never dare take his seat. He not only took it, but took it in presence of the men he knew to have been his bitter and relentless foes, and whom he thus compelled to view their own defeat, powerless to avert it. At the head of the procession on a white charger rode the czar's chief aide-de-camp, General Count Ammonoff, and people wondered very much to see by his side what had never been seen in such a procession before, a lady on horseback, dressed in a sort of military riding habit trimmed exactly like the officer's uniform, while behind them rode two aides whose pale faces and haggard looks showed that they at least were not willing participants in the spectacle.

"Who's the lady? and who are those officers?" asked the wife of one ambassador to another, after the ceremony was over. "How strange she must have felt on horseback, with all those men staring at her. Who is she, I wonder?"

Her friend happened to be a court gossip, and told the whole story:

"Don't you know? That's the Countess Ammonoff, and she was obliged by the czar to ride as she did as punishment for having mixed up in Nihilist plots."

"But why?"

"Well, it seems that her husband married her to save her life when she was running away from Russia with two aides of the czar who had turned Nihilists, and this Count Ammonoff followed them across the steppe and captured them after they had got over the border into Persia. It is said that he shot both of the men with her and brought them in wounded, single-handed. And then it became a question of sending her to Siberia or making a good woman of her by marrying her to the faithful aide. Anyway, she took the benefit of the czar's offer and became a countess from a princess."

"And who was she before?"

The gossip lowered her voice.

"Don't mention it, my dear, but they say she was the queen of all the Nihilists. No one knows who she was since the death of the Princess Koulikoff."

"What? Is she dead?"

The gossip shrugged her shoulders.

"Her nephew, young Paul Stepanitch, has inherited her estates, so she must be dead. But they say—"

"What?"

"That the new Countess Ammonoff was once—"

"Who?"

"THE QUEEN OF THE NIHILISTS!"

THE END.

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248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
203 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
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251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
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171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
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153 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

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888 Nightshade in New York.
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711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.
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642 Red Pard and Yellow.
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
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559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
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512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
505 Phil Fox, the Genteel Spotter.
496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
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480 Hawkspare, the Man with a Secret.
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
441 The California Sharp.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
352 The Desperate Dozen.
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob, or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
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294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
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287 Billy Blue-Eyes. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
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827 Kit Bandy's Brigade; or, Dan, the Mountain Guide.
939 Kit Bandy's Star Engagement.

153 Jack Drew, the Nemesis, or, Eagle Kit the Boy Demon.
182 Jack Drew's Drop; or, Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
202 Jack Drew in Deadwood; or, Prospect Pete.

87 Keen Knife on Guard; or, Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide.
81 Keen Knife, the Prince of the Prairie.

5 Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew.

13 The Dumb Spy.

41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.

58 The Border King; or, The Secret Trail.

71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.

74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.

88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger; or, The Heiress.

134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.

148 Sear-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.

178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.

218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.

224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Catch.

228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.

238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.

248 The Magicked Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.

260 Bare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.

272 Minkie Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.

290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy, or, Old Caleb Arbockle.

300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.

334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.

409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.

417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.

457 Winged Foot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.

482 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.

482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.

482 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

653 Don Barr, the Plains Freelance.

670 Norway Nels, the Big Boy Mountaineer.

778 Highland Harry, the Wizard Rifleman.

828 Poker Jack, the Detective Sport.

BY T. J. FLANAGAN.

909 Midshipman Dare, the Pirate Catcher.

925 The Young Cowboy Captain.

933 The Two Midshipmen; or, The Corsair-Chaser's First Cruise.

BY DAN DUNNING.

746 Or Jack, the Secret Service Spy.

767 Mac and Jack, the Invincibles; or, The Diabolical Three.

875 Detective Dave's Close Call.

884 Farrel Fox and His Girl Ferret.

898 Farrel Fox's Sweep-Stakes.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.

435 Gilt Ther Owney, the Unknown.

490 Gilt Ther Owney's Pledge.

518 The Demon Doctor; or, Deadhold, the Kid Detective.

581 Double-Curve Dan, the Pitcher Detective.

598 Fluke, the Singer Detective; or, Owney in a New Role.

608 The Pitcher Detective's Foil; or, Dan's Double Play.

616 The Ocean Detective; or, The Last Cruise of the Black Bear.

681 The Pitcher Detective's Toughest Tussle.

756 Larry the Thoroughbred; or, Beaten on Every Side.

779 Iron Hand, the Charmed Detective.

854 Uncle Sam's Detective in Chicago.

BY WM. G. PATTEN.

629 Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport; or, The Jubilee of Jacktown.

643 Violet Vane's Victory; or, The Jasper City Clean Out.

698 Violet and Daisy, the Pony Pards.

705 Violet Vane's Vow; or, The Crafty Detective's Craft.

724 Violet Vane's Vengeance; or, The Wipe-Out.

730 Violet Vane's Verdlet; or, The Game at Coffin City.

741 Violet Vane, the Ventriiloquist Vidocq; or, Sport vs. Sport.

750 Violet Vane, the Vanquished; or, The Life Struggle.

768 Violet Vane's Vision; or, The Fiery Hand of Fate.

489 The Diamond Sport; or, The Double Face of Red Rock.

519 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.

531 Daisy Ware, the Sport from Denver.

587 Old Bombshell, the Ranger Detective.

604 Iron Fern, the Man of Fire; or, Among the Vultures.

619 The Boy Tramp Detective; or, The Double Grip Witness.

641 Dismal Dave's Dandy Pard; or, The Clue to Capt. Claw.

651 Bound Boy Frank, the Young Amateur Detective.

682 Wild Vulcan, the Lone-Range Rider.

714 Old Misery, the Man from Missouri.

774 Clear-Grit Cal, the Never-Say-Die Detective.

789 Sam Sheridan, the Secret Service Sport.

806 Cowboy Steve, the Ranch Mascot.

826 Nobby Nat, the Tenderfoot Detective.

836 Sharper Stoke's Double Deal.

957 Spotter Bob in New York.

966 Spotter Bob's Bowery Backet.

BY COLONEL DELLE SAR.

105 The Lion of the Sea; or, The Valled Lady.

746 Ood Diamond; or, The Gambler's Big Game.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER.

15 The Sea-Cat; or, The Witch of Darien.

29 The Dumb Page; or, The Doge's Daughter.

43 Dick Darling, the Pony Express Rider.

100 Lance and Lasso; or, The Children of the Chaco.

154 The Sword Hunters; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders.

159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper James Coffin's Cruise.

200 The Boy Bedouins; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance.

214 Wolfgang, the Robber of the Rhine.

249 Milo Homer, the Animal King; or, Round the World.

265 The Tiger Tamer; or, The League of the Jungle.

281 Black Nick, the Demon Rider.

395 California Joe's War Trail.

BY CAPT. J. F. C. ADAMS.

84 Oregon Sol; or, Nick Whiffles' Boy Spy.

46 Glass-Eye, the Great Shot of the West.

54 Ned Hazel, the Boy Trapper.

56 Nels, Whiffles' Pet; or, In the Valley of Death.

60 The White Indian; or, The Scout of the Yellowstone.

79 Old Zip's Cabin; or, The Greenhorn in the Woods.

81 Lightning Jo, the Terror of the Prairie.

85 Buck Buckram; or, Boss, the Female Trapper.

947 Old Grizzly and His Pets; or, The Wild Hunter.

951 Light-house Light; or, Oocoola, the Firebrand.

957 The Lost Hunters; or, The Underground Camp.

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28 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captain.
64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk; or, Old Powder-face.
94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
128 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
139 Judge Lynch Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy; or, The Mad Hunter.
198 Arkana-wi; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tomkot's Crusade.
231 Plucky Phil; or, Ross, the Red Jezebel.
241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Rowie.
267 The Buckskin Detective; or, The King of Road-agents.
279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Deserader.
294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowls Blade of 'Joch-topa.
302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trapper Jar Bully.
316 Old Eclipsa, Tramp Card of Arizona.
326 The Ten Pardos; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
266 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.

383 Captain Outlass; or, The B. Canoe's Girl Foo.

396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.

411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.

418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter; or, The Gold Gang of New York.

425 Texas Tramp, the Border Rattler.

436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox; or, The Mystery of Room 21.

445 The City Vampire; or, Red Rollo's Pigeon.

461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.

470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.

477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.

499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.

502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.

512 Dodge Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.

521 Dodge Dick's Best Dodge; or, The Gotham Gold Gang.

528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.

538 Dodge Dick, the Dock Ferret.

543 Dodge Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.

553 Dodge Dick's Desperate Case.

563 Dodge Dick, the Boy Viceroy; or, The Gang of Three.

573 The Two Shadows; or, Dodge Dick's Stop Game.

582 Dodge Dick's Dream; or, The Man from Jersey.

594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.

610 Old Skinner, the Gold Shark; or, Tony Sharp on Guard.

626 The Champion Pardoe; or, The Lucifer of Silver Bar.

637 Dick Bonn, the Dock Boy Detective.

645 Kit, the Pavement Sharp.

658 Billy Bantam, the Boy Beagle.

671 Jersey Jed, the Boy Hunter; or, Shadowing the Shadower.

685 Happy Hugh, the Boy Musician Detective.

701 Photograph Fred, the Camera Sharp.

715 Wide Awake Len, the Quaker City Ferret.

723 Dolly Doll, the Pavement Detective; or, Trapping Big Game.

742 Billy Winks, the Bell Boy Detective.

754 Billy Winks, the Boss Boy Shadow.

768 Eagle Ned, the Boy on Guard; or, The Camp Spiders.

780 Tonkaway Tom, the Red Wizard.

827 The Bantam Sport.

848 Clip, the Battery Ferret; or, Jack's Extra Fool Play.

897 Davy Doon's Big Bounce.

905 Dandy Nugget, the Boy Shadow.

921 The Boy from Denver.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.

122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.

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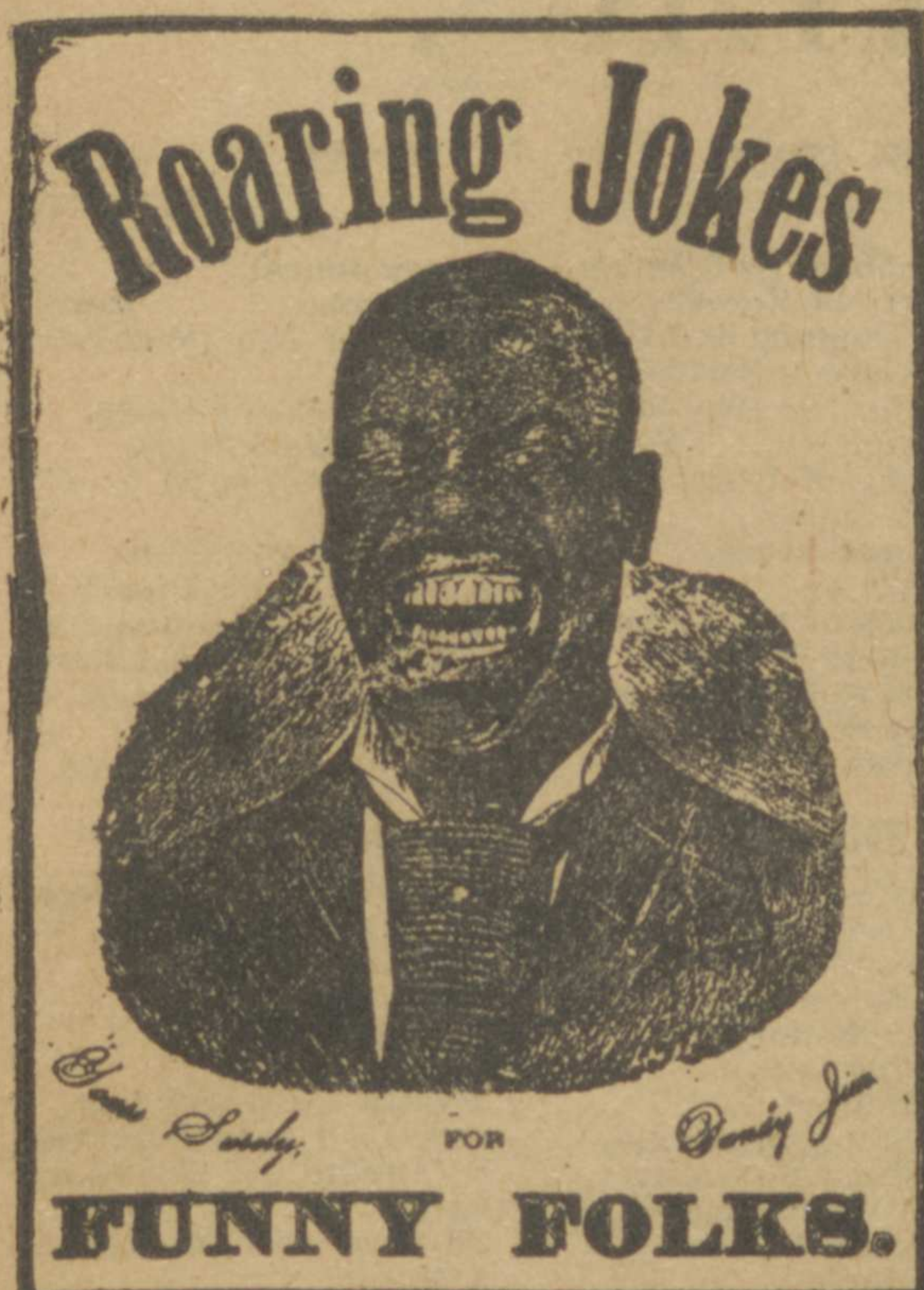
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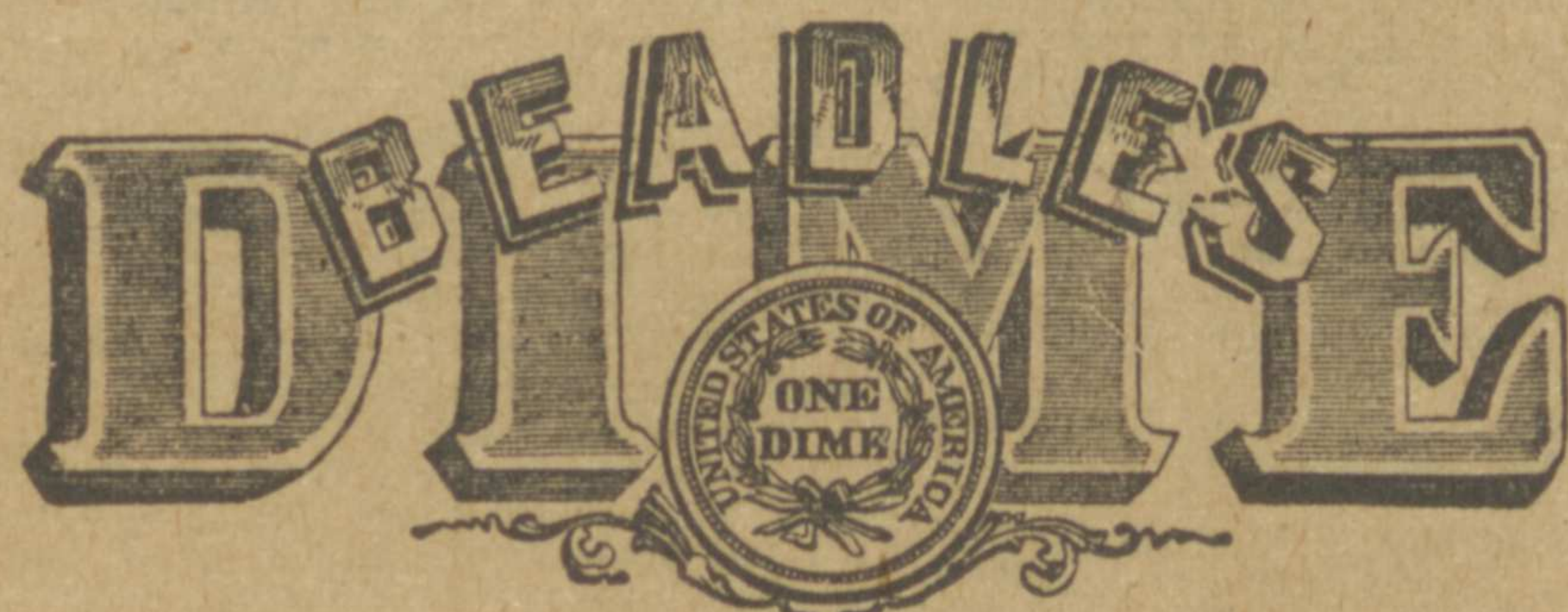
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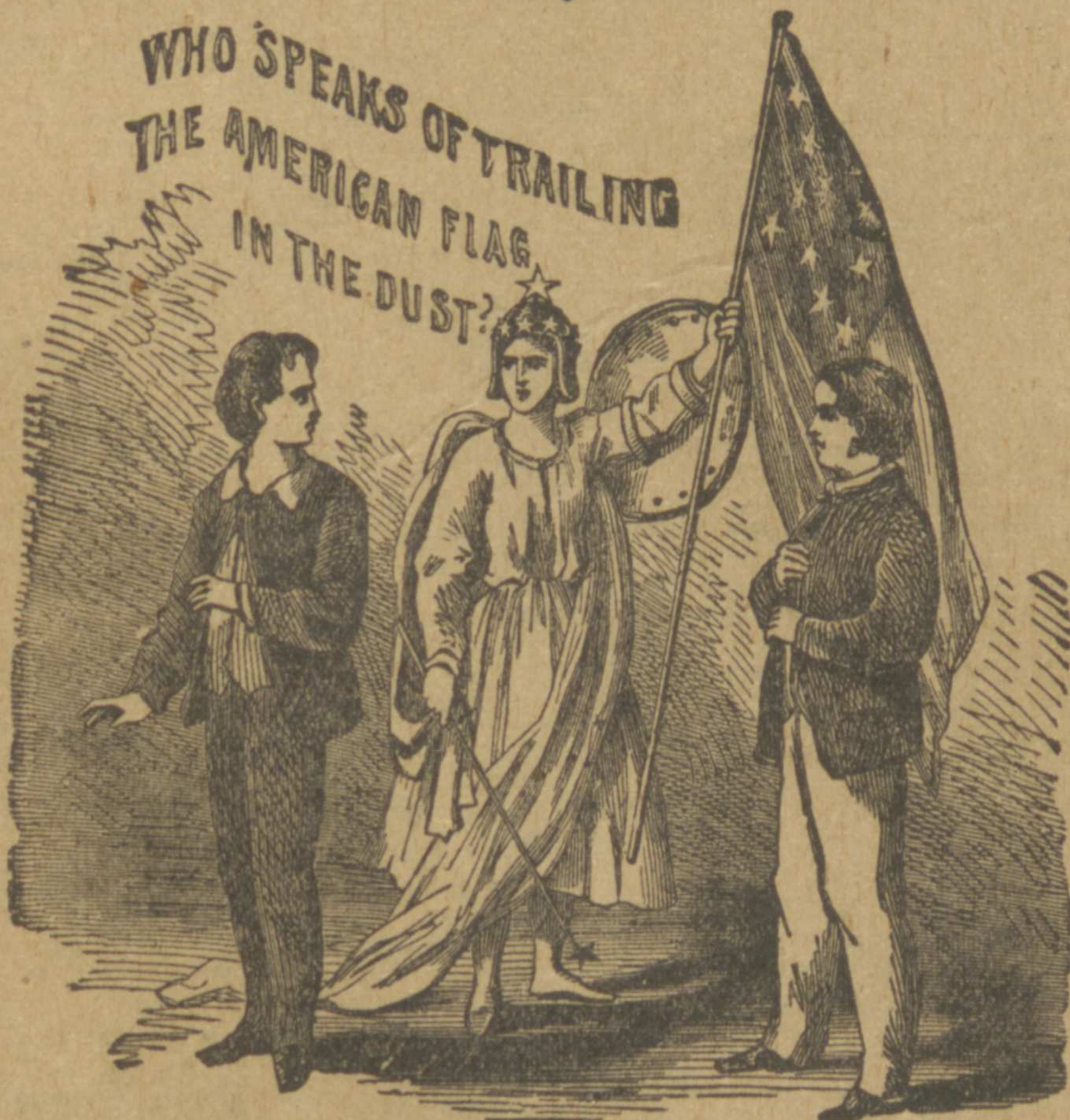
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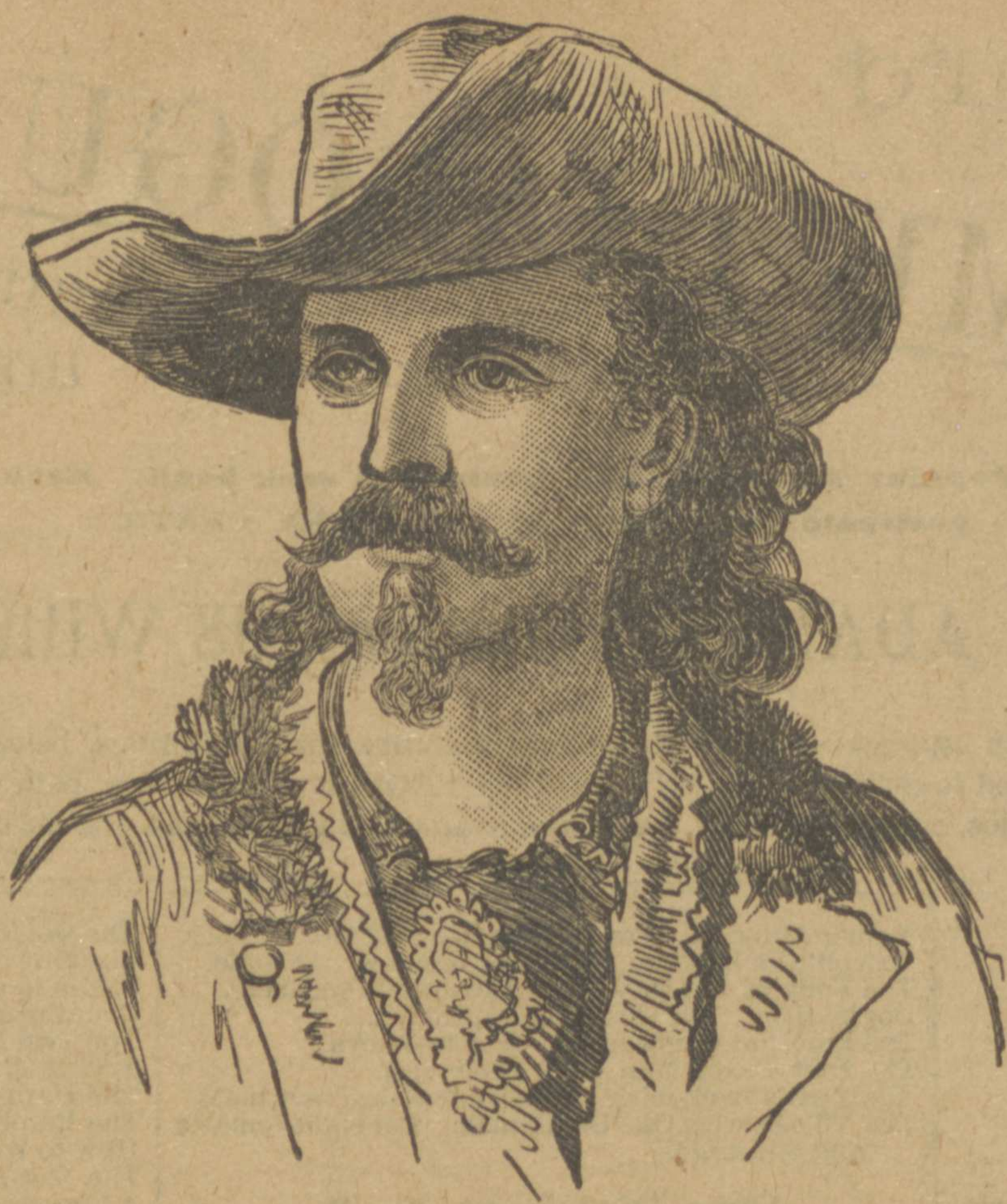
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